

Bound for Freedom

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Texts: John 8:31-36, Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Good morning, brothers and sisters! I bring you greetings from the churches of Urabá Presbytery in Colombia! As most of you know, I was traveling in Colombia last Sunday—we were there for one week and packed an amazing amount into that week – we visited 10 churches in 9 towns, including 3 towns I had never visited. While we were in the foothills of the Andes, we visited an indigenous community of the *Embera Katio* people, and we visited Dabeiba, the hometown of Diego Higueta, Executive Secretary of the *Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia* – Diego has been here more than once. I preached in Dabeiba last Sunday and today's sermon is adapted from that sermon. For 13 years we have shared a partnership between Urabá Presbytery and Winnebago Presbytery—we have grown to know and love one another. We have visited one another. We have prayed for one another. We have studied God's Word together. And we are different now than we were 13 years ago, and that is in part because of the ways God has worked through our partnership to change us.

Last Tuesday was the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation—500 years ago, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses, his long list of concerns and complaints, to the door of the chapel in Wittenberg, Germany. When he nailed that list to the door, it started a process that freed him from the Catholic Church, the church he loved and wanted to serve. He loved the church. Some of us really understand that. We love the church, too. But Martin Luther loved God more and his understanding of God's call led him right out of the church ... and into a whole new religion.

The word "religion" is almost the same in English and Spanish, and it comes from the Latin word "religere" which means "to bind" – the same Latin root word as the word ligament (ligamento in Spanish). Ligaments bind bones to other bones to create joints, giving us freedom of movement. Religion binds our hearts to God and binds us to one another, giving us the freedom to grow in love, knowing that we are deeply loved. But isn't it odd? Isn't it a paradox, in the idea that binding something could make it more free?

I've been thinking a lot about freedom lately because of our study of the book of Exodus this fall—the story of God calling Moses to lead the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to freedom. As I've been studying Exodus, one message has come through again and again is that God wants us to be free. Indeed, sometimes it was clear that God cares more about our freedom than we do.

The Bible, in discussing freedom, makes it clear that we are not only freed *from*, but we are also freed *for*. That is, not only that we are freed from sin, freed from death, freed from shame, freed from fear, freed from hopelessness—we are also freed for participating with God in the ongoing creation of the world; we are freed for participating in God's mission of love; we are freed for working for justice and reconciliation; we are freed for displaying the Kingdom of God to the world.

And God is so committed to our freedom that God has bound Godself to us in covenant love. And we are invited to discover true freedom by binding ourselves to God and to God's people. And the reading from Deuteronomy reminds us that the Word of God and the presence of God are

transformative—Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone.” Like Martin Luther who learned to follow God instead of the rules of the Catholic Church, we are discovering new capacities within ourselves, too—capacities to grow and change. We are indeed “reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God” in the power of the Spirit. I’m quoting one of the many slogans that came out of the Reformation – sometimes people misquote it as “reformed and always reforming” – but it is not our initiative at reform, it is about being open to God’s transformative work in us.

We went to Colombia because we have a covenant, too. Our covenant is one of *hermanimiento*. *Hermanimiento* is a compound word coming from the Spanish *hermano* or *hermana* meaning brother or sister, and the suffix “*miento*” which implies becoming. Another example of such a word is “*casamiento*” which literally means ‘becoming a home’ but is the word for wedding. *Hermanimiento* is a word for partnership, but it implies a covenantal of binding ourselves to one another in love and shared ministry, of deepening our ties as sisters and brothers in Christ. As we bind ourselves to God and one another, we are discovering new models of leadership, new models of courage, new models of collegiality, new models of mission. We are learning these from our brothers and sisters in Urabá. As they share their stories, as they deeply share their lives with one another, God is binding them into communities whose covenant love grounds them in a deep freedom – they have one another, they know that God is with them, and so they know they are not alone, and that empowers them to the freedom of following God, not bound by fear or by false gods of power, possessions, or prestige. In a way, our sisters and brothers have a big advantage over us – many of them have lost everything, including family members, to the violence in Colombia. And in such trauma, life be reduced to the essentials. Who are we? What can we depend on? What is our central identity? When you really know who you are, there is deep freedom in that. They have found their true identity, as children of God, and that truth has given them great freedom from the ways of the world.

Jesus said, “If you obey my teaching, you really are my disciples, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” We need to seek the truth, and we need to speak the truth—as bearers of the Gospels, we must be truth tellers. Sometimes we are called to speak truth to power. Sometimes we are called to speak the truth in love to one another. Sometimes we need to be able to face the truth ourselves.

The truth is that often we are afraid. We are afraid of the uncertainties in our future. And, at least in the United States, our political leaders speak in ways that are designed to deepen our fears.

When the people of Israel left Egypt, they could not imagine what God had for them in the future. They were afraid. And they often thought that going back to Egypt seemed like a better idea than going forward into a future they couldn’t imagine.

When Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door, he has no idea what God would bring forth. He didn’t plan to leave the Church. He didn’t plan the Reformation. But there is a saying that “if you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans.”

In the United States, the Presbyterian Church is facing an uncertain future, as are many Protestant denominations. Most of our congregations are smaller—a lot smaller—than they used to be. Many churches think they are having financial problems. Not many of our young families or young

adults—people in their 20's and 30's—are in the church. Many people are afraid that the church won't survive. We can't yet imagine what the church might become.

In Colombia, the violence continues even as the peace negotiations carry on. indeed, as the FARC moves away from violence, there are openings for others to try and expand their power through violence. The process of change is unpredictable. There are many questions and much uncertainty. Hope doesn't always seem reasonable. Like the children of Israel long ago, our brothers and sisters in Colombia are facing an uncertain future.

Our partnership is 13 years old. As someone said the other day, it is a teenager! And like most teenagers, our partnership has lots of hope, lots of dreams, lots of energy! We are even more committed now than we were 13 years ago to one another, to deepening our relationships, to praying together, and working together for God's peace and reconciliation. A week ago yesterday in Apartadó, we had good conversations about this partnership in which God has brought us together. We have many exciting ideas but we don't yet know exactly how we will grow together. We don't know what God has for us in our covenant together. We are "reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God" in the power of the Spirit.

What does the Word of God tell us? It tells us to love one another so that the world will know we are Jesus' disciples. It tells us that God is committed to us. It tells us "Do not be afraid."

Even in the time of Jesus, many people resisted following Jesus because he didn't act like what they expected from a Messiah. They couldn't imagine what following him would be like. But those who did follow him found their lives transformed.

We, too, are being transformed as we follow Jesus in this partnership. Who would have thought that a small presbytery in rural Wisconsin and a small presbytery in rural Colombia—both far from the places and people in power—would find themselves bound to one another in *hermanamiento*?

And who would have thought that through this covenant, across the miles and across the differences in languages, God would bring our hearts together, deepen our courage, strengthen our courage, and empower us to ever more faithful work for justice, for peace, for reconciliation?

As we share our stories and our lives with one another in this partnership, and in this congregation, the living God weaves our stories into the Divine Story, so that our shared stories and our shared lives become part of the work of reformation and transformation. "Reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God" in the power of the Spirit may sound hard. Change can be frightening. But we follow a living God who does not leave us as he found us.

Yes, life will change. The church may change. Our nations may change. Even the earth may change.

But God's love for us, God's solidarity with us, God's commitment to us—these do not change. And God still has a mission for us—a mission of hope, love, and peace—for us, and for the world God loves so much. Amen.