

Of Burning Barns and Freedom

Sermon by John Strommen on John 8:31-36 October 28, 2018

My friend tells a story from his days growing up on a North Dakota farm. He was just a boy when his father woke him up the middle of the then night and told him to get dressed quickly. A neighbor's barn was burning, and they needed to help their neighbor.

My friend arrived with his dad and many other neighbors were there too, but all they could do was stand and watch, because the barn was engulfed in flames and therefore not salvageable. There were no people in the barn, thankfully, but there were cries coming from the barn – the cries of a terrified animal. It was a white stallion desperately trying to get out. Its cries came from two different locations in the barn, so it was obviously moving about frantically – back and forth – trying to find an opening, a way through the inferno. This went on for several minutes, the small crowd watching anxiously.

Then, all of the sudden, the gift of an opening presented itself, and the white stallion burst through the flames to safety! The people cheered this remarkable escape from a fiery prison into freedom.

Now, that stallion was a prisoner until a way opened to freedom. Our gospel lesson, too, speaks of prisoners- being slaves to one's own sin. Even the Jews who thought they were already free because they were sons of Abraham – even they were not exempt, according to Jesus. Jesus said, "anyone who commits sin is a slave to sin," which would of course be all of us – Pharisees, tax collectors, disciples of Jesus, King David, you and me, all!

But it's a mistake to reduce sin to "bad things" we do, because then we might say to ourselves, "well, I better stop doing these bad things. I better take control of my life." Only to watch things get worse. Sin is not just doing the wrong thing, it's the fundamental predisposition that you or I can fix our own problems, be the master of our own universe. That we can justify our own existence. In a word, that we don't need God. As long as we are in a bondage such as this, there is no future for any of us. We might as well be in a burning barn with no way out. At least no way out that we can orchestrate.

But Jesus said, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day we celebrate this freedom which is ours through knowing the person of Jesus Christ. And no one was more keenly aware of this freedom than Martin Luther, the founder of the Reformation. In fact, Luther was once that stallion in a burning barn. The burning barn was a theology imploding on itself, built on the doomed efforts of every sincere monk, priest, farmer or businessman to show God that they were good enough to win God's approval.

Raised in a religious home, Martin always tried to be pleasing to God. Always a good steward of what he had been given, Martin ended up at a prestigious university and did well enough to be accepted into law school, but one day he was nearly struck dead with a bolt of lightning, right there on the law school campus! Luther interpreted this lightning bolt as a "gentle reminder" from God to give his life completely to God, enter a monastery and train to become a priest. Well, the lightning bolt also started Luther's barn on fire.

He studied hard and tried to be what a monk was supposed to be: holy and blameless before God, a man who has fully subjected his sinful nature to the cleansing power of God. But no matter how much he tried to be good and righteous, he knew in his heart that he was kind of arrogant, that he had an

anger problem, that his faith sometimes degenerated into doubt and despair - generally, Luther knew that he *should be better than he was*. Luther felt more and more that God couldn't possibly accept him, underachiever that he was, so he found himself in a crisis.

As Luther's spirit cried out for an escape from this burning barn of anxiety and guilt, he stumbled upon Romans 1:17, which reads: "The righteous will live by faith." It was then that he saw a huge opening in his flaming wall of sin. He realized that it was not his righteousness that would save him – it was God's. Righteousness. All that was left, then, was to trust – have faith – in God's righteousness, not his own!

Turning his gaze upon Christ, he stepped through the burning barn, through an opening called grace, and Martin Luther started the Reformation.

What sort of barn are you in? Is it getting warm yet? Luther's burning barn was created out of a fierce desire to appease a demanding God; to prove himself worthy.

Most of us probably can't quite relate to Luther's constant anxiety in the face of God, although I know some can. For many of us, the insecurity that haunts us may feel less religious. Not so much the need to be good enough for God, but good enough for our parents, our children, our peers, our boss, or a nameless culture that places impossible demands on us. Or perhaps we demand too much of ourselves. It is certainly the case that for modern people, we're so afraid of emptiness or failure in our own lives, we think that by being better than someone else, by measuring up to some sort of standard for success, by making a name for ourselves, by creating meaning for ourselves, we can combat that emptiness. Well, we can't. We'll always find that no matter how hard we try, we'll end up like Luther, unable to prove our worth, unable to measure up.

Our justification, our validation, our salvation, must come from outside of us, that which reconnects us to the source of life, love and goodness. We are the stallion that Jesus Christ has freed from the hot blazes of self-justification.

Lieutenant Dan was Forrest Gump's commanding officer in Vietnam. In this fictional story, Lieutenant Dan was a surly, cynical military man whose sole meaning in life was to die in battle like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. This was the only meaning he could create: die in battle, no matter the circumstances. Not much else mattered. When he was seriously wounded, Lieutenant Dan thought, "this is it," but he was rescued by Forrest. He told Forrest to leave him alone to die, but Forrest would have none of it. All Forrest Gump did was love the people around him, even risking his life to do so.

Lieutenant Dan was bitter for years that Forrest saved him. Now he lived life in a wheel chair, missing his legs from the knee on down. But one day, on Forrest Gump's shrimp boat, Lieutenant Dan realized that Forrest had actually saved his life – in more ways than one.

(film clip)

Did that seem like a baptism to anyone else?

Lieutenant Dan's burning barn wasn't the war, it was his despair and lack of gratitude for the gift of life. Ever been there?

I close with this: a few days ago, I had the privilege of talking to a man I've met just hanging around in NE Mpls. He will remain anonymous, but suffice it to say he is recovering; he is recovering both from

alcoholism and from atheism. He is a member of AA and has been sober for 8 years, and he's doing just great. As many of you know, members of Alcoholics Anonymous begin by admitting they are not in control of their lives and have become powerless, and that they move forward in their healing process by submitting to a higher power as they understand it.

I asked him about that higher power as he understands it. Is it real to him?

"Well," he said, "I've been an atheist most of my life, but I've experienced something different now. There is definitely a higher power out there. My whole life I've had this void inside of me that only God could fill. That's why I was drinking. I was trying to fill that hole in my life many different ways, but nothing that I did would fill the hole, so eventually I resorted to excessive drinking."

"So the void has been filled now?"

"Yeah, that higher power has filled it, and now I'm a new person. Now I love life, now I can be there for others."

I said to him, "it doesn't sound like you're an atheist anymore."

He smiled. "No, I guess not," he said.

If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed! Amen.