

When one moves into a new house everything is perfect. But, after living in that house for many years, much has been broken, worn, or needs to be replaced. So, it is throughout life. Much time is needed for repair, reshaping, and reforming. It makes no difference whether we are discussing physical or spiritual issues – life constantly is in need of reformation.

We get so used to what we get used to and soon we don't ask questions or forget what the real truth of our life is all about. Traditions, routines, and our selfish nature often wall us off from God as we assume we have the answers, or we trust the answers that seem to serve us best.

Long ago, Martin Luther struggled with incomplete answers to sin and grace. Traditions had been so ingrained no one remembered how they had started or what God's scripturally inspired guidance had been. This is a broken world and even people of faith sometimes get in trouble with freedom God brings, and our attempts to explain, control, or institutionalize God can have unplanned results.

In Luther's world, people were convinced that God was angry for their sins, and at death a time of penance in a place called "purgatory" was necessary before one could enter heaven. There was no scriptural basis for such a claim, but it had become a teaching of the Church, just as happens in many churches today.

And the same thing happens with issues dealing with culture, schedules, attitudes, comfort levels and selfishness. There are so many ways we can be trapped in places and ways we never imagined get us into trouble. The terrible price of our need to control faith and life is that often the freedom of the Gospel winds up being silenced!

In the beginning, God created a perfect world. That world exists no more. God created people free to reach out in love to one another. Instead, all are trapped or poisoned by the lies of the serpent, as we believe we deserve to be like God. In doing so we continue to destroy our relationships with God and each other.

Amazingly, rather than sending lightning bolts of destruction, God chose to reform creation by coming "in the flesh." He shared this undeserved gift through the miracle of manger, cross and empty tomb! He proclaimed that true freedom is found only in love, and true worship joy is found in serving God and neighbor. As icing on the cake, he entered the most broken part of our lives – the place we call "death" – and ended its rule and destruction of God's gifts of creation.

When Martin Luther actually read scripture, he discovered that faith in Christ alone, rather than our actions brings us into a right relationship with God. Christ's sacrificial life and death is a gift of grace, from a loving God who is

disappointed (not angry.) For Luther this served to help him as if cataracts had been removed from his eyes. The price of freedom is God's alone!

Remember, freedom isn't "free!" People died to free slaves. Taxes are paid to provide free healthcare and food. Parents surrender much for children to grow to make adult choices. And Jesus died on a cross that we might be set free!

Last year was an exercise in patience, futility, frustration, and hope. We were forced into things like masks and distancing and isolation which were most troubling and difficult to endure as we felt our freedom had been taken away. At the same time, we often are so used to what we get used to, that we often don't realize the real truth about what is going on. Traditions, routines, and habits become so ingrained that often we miss opportunities and beneficial changes because we are so used to what we are used to.

There is a popular fable about a frog in a kettle, which suggests that if a frog is dropped in a kettle of hot water, it will immediately jump out. If it is placed in a pot of cold water in which the heat is gradually raised to boiling, the frog won't notice the gradual temperature rise and will boil rather than jump to freedom.

This past year is a great example to discuss where we were trapped and where we were free. Unfortunately, many get confused about which is which. Years ago, I was ridiculed for getting so used to oversized aviator frames for my glasses that twenty years later I hadn't noticed they were out of style, and I looked like a frog. But I had gotten used to what I was used to and didn't notice. So, here are questions to ponder. Where are you comfortably trapped but not know it, and where are you uncomfortably free yet unwilling to move?

That was often the topic of Jesus parables and sermons as he wandered around the countryside. The religious leaders controlled all the answers but had forgotten the real questions. They didn't realize how they had used their control to trap others. They were so busy controlling others the very Messiah they were waiting for was right in front of them. They were missing the most important thing in their lives which was God's presence. They had gotten so comfortable that when Jesus showed them the true way to love God and neighbor, they were like frogs trapped in a kettle with the heat slowly rising and didn't think to move.

The very people they condemned and criticized were the first Jesus reached out to embrace. And the key in his love for them was to teach them to forgive and love those who had been so hateful to them. Dr. Martin Luther King understood that and made it the power of his non-violent reforming of people's hearts. The only way to change a culture is to change the culture and that is the gift Jesus' love is all about.

Last year we faced many difficult problems and issues, and many felt it was a moment to turn the tables and exercise human freedom. Real problems in the past have trapped people on both sides of every fence. And yet, as human wisdom always discovers, in our rush to react we often wind up imprisoning ourselves or others in a future no one even imagined. For instance, we can all

agree that the Civil War was a terrible chapter in our history and slavery was an unimaginable condition. But to tear down statues or burn any book that offends simply repeats history's mistakes and destroys any opportunity to remember what was so wrong that we don't repeat the mistake again. The Bible is full of the mistakes and sins of God's chosen people, and the purpose is to learn that it doesn't happen again.

That is what sin is all about. Over the years even Christian institutions try to help God with our rules and traditions and wind up making a mess of the freedom Christ brings. This is a broken world and even on our best days and with the most noble intentions, we are unable to perfectly love, care for, or support those around us. Selfishness sneaks in. Power is awfully tempting. And the need to punish is always easier than the ability to forgive.

We live in a culture that sees freedom as a RIGHT to do, speak, or get "whatever we think we deserve. In doing so we forget the most important answer – which is Jesus' response to death: "FINISHED! DEFEATED! OVER!" There was a tremendous price that was due, and he paid. Remember, freedom isn't "free!" And Jesus died on a cross that we might be set free!

As we admit how our wisdom and comfort levels trap us, and accept the forgiving love of Jesus, then and only then are we free. Once we have grasped that gift the only response of the faithful is to share it as it has first been shared with me. We have been set free by love that we might live with love. That is what the Gospel is all about. You want reform? Here it is! Love God. Love neighbor. This is the reforming Christ has come to share.