In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text for this Reformation Sunday is the glorious concluding verse of our Gospel Lesson from John 8. It is a verse that speaks of freedom. As I read the verse aloud, imagine our resurrected Jesus, who is right here in our midst as he has promised, imagine him looking with kindness right into your eyes, right into mine, and saying this:

36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.
(John 8:36, RSV)

Many of us are trapped in various prisons — too much enslaved by greed or covetousness or perhaps lust or other sins, too much limited by bad choices we have made or opportunities that just did not work out for us, too much reduced, perhaps even in our own eyes, by guilt or by talents we have not developed, or deeds of love we could have done, but did not. But listen to Jesus now. Listen! He is speaking of freedom. He seems to be speaking of a new life, a chance for a better life going forward:

36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.
(John 8:36, RSV)

My theme in this sermon is that in Jesus there is freedom for us. If we are troubled by guilt, with him there is absolution. If we are sick, he is the Great Physician of body and soul. If we live in a walk-up apartment — one that seemed fine when we were young, but now almost leaves us a prisoner in our own home — Jesus is preparing us a mansion in heaven, with all the elevators we need. If we are grieving, maybe even years later, for someone we lost, he is the Lord of life and death, conqueror of death. Indeed, in Jesus there is everything we need for a full life in time and in eternity. There is freedom and love. There is peace and joy unspeakable and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8, KJV). There is a holy life here below and heaven ahead. There is the kind of life that our Maker intended for us, so that we are more in sync with our own creation. Millions of Christians, even billions of Christians by now after all these centuries, have known freedom and fullness of life in Christ Jesus. Someday we will join them in heavenly testimonies to the goodness of Jesus both in this earthly life and in eternity. I want this for you and for your loved ones and for our neighbors around this globe and for myself. What we need is to turn with evermore earnestness to life in Christ.
So my theme is that in Jesus there is freedom for us and fullness of life. Along the way of developing this theme I want to share with you a fundamental conviction of theologian David S. Yeago. Professor Yeago has stood at this sacred desk and preached to us a good number of times over the years. Let me share one of his important convictions about Martin Luther and about the Reformation. His conviction is that for Martin Luther and the early reformers, the holy gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is a larger and more glorious gospel than perhaps we have grasped so far. In particular, the gospel of Jesus can never be sufficiently expressed in the negative. It must also be expressed in the positive, lest we end up with what the theologians call an “antinomian” gospel — that is, a vision of the gospel that cares little for God’s holy law.

So, I am now going to state a simple version of our Reformation Sunday theme: It is the noble theme that we are not justified by our good works, but rather by the goodness and grace of Jesus Christ. The first part of this conviction – the idea that we are not justified by our good works – this is a huge doctrine and a very consoling one, because, I fear that if we were justified by our good works, many of us would be lost. I fear that the whole conglomeration of our good works adds up to a pretty small pile, especially when compared to the continual goodness and purity of our God. You are good people, I know, and I admire you. Still, none of us is perfect, compared to the perfection of our God. None of us loves so continually and so wholeheartedly as does our God. We all fall short in some measure. And so it is that the doctrine that we are not justified by our good works is a consoling doctrine. But it is a negative doctrine. It contains that little word “not.” We are not justified by our good works.

But David Yeago’s conviction is that for Martin Luther and the early reformers there is more to the gospel than this lovely but negative doctrine. There is the other half of the doctrine. There is the positive doctrine that we are justified by the resurrected and living Jesus, who is good and gracious. Our resurrected Jesus Christ invites us to live in him. Long ago he invited Peter and James and John and the other disciples to live in him and to abide in him and to receive fullness of life in him. The good news for you and me is that the same Jesus looks us in the eye and says to each of us, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28). Come unto me and I will lead you into adventure upon adventure of goodness. Come unto me and I will give you freedom and peace and holiness of life here below and heaven ahead.” This life in Christ is the source of our sanctification. This positive doctrine of coming to Jesus is what helps us to live a holy life in these years granted to us.

This is Reformation Sunday and so let me speak a bit about Martin Luther and about his love for life in Christ.
In the year 1527 Martin Luther found himself thinking about death, about his own death. He was still a fairly young man - about 44 years of age – but it was a particularly hard year for him. During the summer he suffered a sudden sickness that was so severe that he expected to die, and his recovery was very slow. In August the plague struck Wittenberg, and the university and Luther’s academic colleagues moved to another town (Jena). But Luther remained behind with his pastor, John Bugenhagen. He stayed to help his pastor and his town. Picture that. Draw a frame around that one passing detail in Luther’s life. The plague has come to town. Luther is a husband and a father and he has many responsibilities in life. He wants to live. In face of the plague, his fellow faculty members at Wittenberg University flee the town. But Luther stays to help his pastor and the people. The possibility of death is real for Luther, and so he puts his house in order in one particular sense: he writes what is called his *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*. The first two sections of this treatise contain Luther’s final responses to extreme reformers who departed from Catholic teaching on the sacraments. Particularly he responds to those reformers, like Zwingli, who denied the traditional doctrine of Christ’s real presence in the Holy Communion. So in these first two sections of his treatise Luther explains himself one last time. He does not intend to write about these Eucharistic controversies anymore.

But it is the third section of this treatise that especially interests me now. In the third section Luther puts down in writing his fundamental convictions. He is trying to guard against people misusing his name after he has died. He does not want people to say, “Luther believed this,” when Luther did not actually believe it. And so Luther summarized his fundamental convictions in this third part of his *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*. He is willing to take his stand on Judgment Day with these convictions. He writes this:

> I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world, point by point. I am determined to abide by it until my death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ…. I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the Last Judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

How, then, does Luther proceed with his solemn confession? How does he go ahead and talk about his fundamental convictions? He does so as a child,
reciting the Apostles’ Creed and commenting on it. He speaks of the God who loved us before we ever loved him. He speaks of the God who gives himself to us. This is the God Luther means to give his heart to, to find the meaning of life in, and to serve as long as his heart is beating.

For me a kind of summit paragraph is the one in which Luther talks about all three of the divine Persons in God and about how each One gives himself to us. I think it is fair to say of Luther that Christian life for him consists in us giving ourselves to God as God gives himself to us. Luther’s great paragraphs go this way:

These are the three persons and one God, who has given himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that he is and has. The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam’s fall. Therefore the Son himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and his gifts.

But because this grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly and completely. He teaches us to understand this deed of Christ which has been manifested to us, helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage and impart it to others, increase and extend it.

For Luther, Christian life consists in giving ourselves to the Triune God and never walking away.

I used the word “childlike” in describing Luther’s great confession of his most fundamental convictions. I got that word “child” from Luther’s magnificent sermon on this morning’s gospel text from John 8. It is fascinating to me that at the end of page after page of careful distinctions and magnificent rhetoric, Luther ends up by appealing to us that we should become more like children. He is concerned for the idea of continuing in the word of Jesus—emphasis on that word “continuing.” That is how our Gospel Lesson begins, with Jesus speaking of continuing in his word. And so we read:

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, ” and
you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”
(John 8:31-32, RSV)

Jesus knows very well that it is possible to come to him with a passing interest, like seeds sown on rocky soil that at first spring up but then wilt because they have no depth. He knows that people can come to him in a calculating way, imagining that they will become rich or happy through him, so that their coming to Jesus is another kind of investment in their life. Or they can come in a dreamy way, as if indulging in some ideal for a while. But Jesus wants us to come to him with our whole hearts. He wants us to continue with him, even if times should be hard, even if we must bear a cross for a while.

And for Luther, this means that we should come to Jesus in a childlike way. We should not become doctors too fast, as Luther puts it. We should not imagine that we have mastered Jesus and then move on. Rather, we should love Jesus as children love their parents, throwing in their lot with them, loving them, and never imagining that they will depart from their parents, especially if those parents are good parents. And Jesus is good!

I end with this little story. It means much to me. Our torchbearers for this Reformation Sunday are my son Sam and his girlfriend Robin, who is very dear also to Carol and me. I have asked permission of Sam to share this little childhood story with you, and he said yes, indeed, because he agrees with me that it is a good image of what it means for us to live in Christ and to throw our lot in with him.

The story goes this way. Once upon a time, when Sam was just a little guy, I knelt before him and gave him a good, long lecture about something. It must have seemed important to me at the time, though I cannot even recall what it was. Probably some nonsense. Anyway, I was kneeling before Sam, looking him in the eyes, and lecturing away at him. And suddenly Sam, bless him, threw his little arms around my neck and said, “Dad, I love you. And you are breaking my heart.”

What I say to you dear people is that when Jesus is dealing with you, perhaps in the sermon, perhaps in the Absolution at the end of Private Confession, and quite soon now in the Holy Communion... when Jesus is dealing with you, what is happening is that our resurrected Jesus Christ is throwing his arms around your neck, and saying, “I love you.”

I tell you, everything good on earth is contained in that embrace of Jesus Christ. If sin, death, and the devil had a John Deere tractor, let it be with us that they cannot tear us away from that hug of Jesus. And if along the way we should fall some from our life in Christ, let us drag our poor bodies back to him just as quick as we can because that is where there is freedom and life for us, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen