

The Everlasting Gospel of Jesus
John 8:31-36
The Observance of the Reformation (observed)
October 28, 2018

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you will be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

A few weeks ago, while the contractor plastering our walls took a break from his work, I was painting for him the picture of what else would be included in the end result of our sanctuary project. As I described it, he stopped me and said, "I belong to a Catholic Church, haven't gone in a few years; what's the difference between what Lutherans believe and what Catholics believe?"

I'll tell you what I said, but first, here's what I didn't say: I didn't say, "Lutherans follow the teachings of a man named Martin Luther." Friends, that's just wrong. The teachings were not Luther's, any more than the teachings I declare to you are mine. What good is any teaching or doctrine that is attributable to sinners? Didn't Luther himself confess this when he wrote, "With might of ours can nothing be done; soon were our loss effected"? Likewise, the observance of the Reformation is not about Luther, the carrier of God's Word, any more than Pentecost is about the carrier of God's Word, Peter, or Christmas is about the carrier of God's Word, Mary.

But, here's what I *did* say to the plasterer. First, I said, "The difference is not in the people in the pews; there are Christians in the pews of Rome just as in the pews of our Church; and there are hidden *unbelievers* in Lutheran churches just as in the Roman church. But the difference is in the teachings, in what the people are *taught* to believe."

Then I pointed him to the wall where I had just described our crucifix soon to be hung, and I said, "The difference comes down to what you make of *Him*... who is Jesus, and how completely do you depend upon *Him* for your salvation."

And I expounded on that answer (and he listened patiently as I talked briefly about Rome's view of Jesus enabling *us* to do good works that save and about praying to the saints and how that unintentionally undercuts Jesus the Savior)... and I continued on about our confession (paraphrasing), "We believe we sinners totally depend on Jesus. Jesus' blood. Jesus' cross. Jesus' work. Jesus' righteousness. Jesus' intercession with the Father. Jesus' forgiveness. We can't get to heaven by our strength, good works, merit ... they don't contribute even a little. If they do, then Jesus died in vain. But, we Lutherans believe that the Jesus to whom the Scriptures point, who upholds the holy Law, who *is* the Gospel in the flesh, who has earned our salvation, we believe that this Jesus is our Savior. Why pray to Mary or the saints if I have Jesus? Why hope in my works if I have Jesus? Why worry about purgatory if I have Jesus saying,

“Today you will be with me in paradise”? And with the freedom I have when my salvation rests with Christ, it also frees me to love my neighbor for the sake of my neighbor, not for my own gain (for that wouldn’t be truly loving my neighbor), but just to love my neighbor as one for whom Christ died. And neighbor and I can live together in joy that our salvation is safe with Christ, and we can look forward together to the resurrection and life everlasting.

The plasterer continued to stare at the blank wall as if looking at the crucifix, and there was a quiet pause... then he turned and looked at me and said, “Huh, if I lived closer, I’d come to *your* church.”

The man loved the teaching of the gospel. In a sense, it doesn’t matter whether you call yourself Catholic or Lutheran or Methodist or Baptist *except that* (it sort of does because) those names imply what you are being taught as the purity of the Christian confession and Scriptural truth.

This is why the Reformation is such a blessing and worthy of our attention. Because, through it (and, yes, through a mouthpiece named Luther... among others), Christ reformed His Church to again see the centrality of the **everlasting** gospel that depends totally upon *Him*.

Our readings for this morning proclaim that clearly, don’t they? Our first reading, from Revelation, even declares that the messenger overhead had an *eternal* gospel to proclaim, to *every*

nation and tribe and language and people. Indeed, the Gospel is for all people to hear, even though not all will have ears to hear. It is for every corner of darkness, even though not all will come into the light. It is for all generations and – within your own individual life – for every decade and year and month and week and day. You can never outgrow your need for the eternal gospel; but you also need never outgrow the Gospel – as if it's a childish fairytale. Far from being fanciful, the Gospel is the divine Word of grace, *from* God to man, that all might know that God is not far removed from us, but draws near to us just as He promised from the brokenness of Eden... he draws near in the flesh and blood of Jesus and vindicates his people.

That's the message the angel flying overhead proclaims: "Fear God and give him glory, because of the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

These are not words of terror, but words of reverence and doxology and praise. For, as we declare with the psalmist, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." And now, not only in Old Testament anticipation, but in New Testament fulfillment, the Gospel declares that God has conquered in the fight through this valiant One Jesus... and judgment draws nigh for sin, death, and the devil. So, with all awe and reverence, we do fear, love, and trust in God above all things... that's now our Christian joy,

because we are condemned no longer by our sins, but covered in baptismal robes made white in the blood of the Lamb. What a blessed eternal gospel is ours!

Now, at this point it must be said, we lose sight of the Reformation of the Church, we lose sight of the true faith of the Church, if we do not carefully understand how to wield this term 'gospel'... this was such an important part of the Reformation, and descendants of the Reformation quickly lost sight of its important truth.

Jesus hints at the importance of staying well-grounded in the whole of Scripture when he spoke to those who believed in Him. Consider the first verse of our gospel text : "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" If people don't carefully consider what it means to remain in Jesus' word, but instead simply believe that the Gospel 'sets you free'... free from the Law, free from needing Jesus, free to be your own god, we sinners will soon find ourselves having given up the eternal gospel to benefit every generation! His hearers on that very day couldn't understand his words of freedom, because they were so earthly-minded; they were so here-and-now focused.

But when we become earthly-minded, when we become here-and-now focused, the Church loses her way and needs reformation. We forget that the salvation God grants is not a

freedom *from* his holiness, not a freedom *from* His Law or glory, but a freedom from being *accursed* by the Law, a freedom from sin's condemnation and bondage to death and the devil... a freedom *in* Christ, not a freedom *from* Christ.

So we need God's Word in which to abide – the whole Word; not just the Gospel, but also His Holy Will. For only God's Word sees and reports truth divinely and purely. Apart from God's Word, the world's wisdom is foggy, unclear, but with God's Word, we may abide in the truth of God's holy will and gracious plans for our eternal deliverance and everlasting life.

The difference between abiding in God's Word and abiding in worldly wisdom is not unlike the difference between looking at what's below the surface of the water from *above* the water versus from the clarity of goggles under the water. From above the water, we see dimly. Everything is unclear and vague, so that we only have a remote understanding of what might be the true picture below the surface. But then, we put on the goggles and plunge our faces through the water that we might see clearly the entire world below the surface. So it is with the world's view of God and salvation. The whole world has some vague concept of deity, and the whole world hopes in something for salvation or for an improvement from our current state. But, from above the water, nothing below is clear. In other words, apart from the Word of God, nothing about God is clear. So also, with God's Word. When we abide in it, we see

everything more clearly: “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” We see clearly and it opens up for us not simply a list of rules to live by (as if the Bible is a how-to book), it opens up for us God’s view of the world, the divine and pure and holy view of His care for and deliverance of the world. This is why the Reformation said the Church lives and breathes *sola* Scriptura. By Scripture alone, God declares the clear truth of this world and our hope for an eternal gospel. And, what is that hope, that truth? What, through the lens of the Scriptures and by abiding in His Word, what do we see and know to be the truth... the truth that sets us free?

For that, let us consider our epistle reading... a reading that begins by saying that God’s Holy Law is just as authoritative a Word from the Almighty Throne as is the Gospel. This authoritative Law of the Holy God causes every mouth to be stopped, and forces the whole world to recognize that we are to be held accountable to God. And that Holy Word that promises self-justification only through perfect keeping of the Law – not only for a moment, but from conception to death – and, even more, requires in your very fiber and being a righteousness that can only come from above... that Law causes every mouth to be stopped; it forces us to admit that through *it*, through the Law, comes knowledge of our sinfulness.

If that is truly God’s Holy Word, then who can stand before the Holy God? Who has *righteousness* to stand before the Holy God? Are we not lost and dead in our trespasses?

Ah, but now the Gospel rushes in and says, the righteousness you need, the righteousness that God demands, the righteousness that can save you because it is God's own righteousness... that righteousness belongs to Jesus Christ. You may fall short of the glory of God in your *unrighteousness*, but Jesus does not fall short of the glory of God. Instead, that perfect, righteous Jesus – your substitute – comes forward to be critiqued by the Holy Law, to be judged by the Holy Law, even to be condemned by and sacrificed for atonement before that Holy Law of God... and that righteous Jesus proves to be the sufficient sacrifice for you. His blood smells of righteousness, His merit smells of righteousness. His suffering smells of righteousness. And it all wafts up to the Father as a pleasing incense, to make peace between God and all who trust in this Jesus and seek to add no other merit to his sacrifice for sins, but trust in him alone. *Solus Christus... Christ alone.*

As our epistle reading says, this doesn't just show God's mercy; it shows his *righteousness*. Righteous because his holiness demanded payment for, not simply excusing of sins... but it also shows his righteousness because Jesus' sacrifice was so meritorious and so sufficient and so perfect that the righteous Father *can't* and *won't* demand even more.

It's this marvelous truth that St. John 'hangs his hat on' when he says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and *the truth* is not in us. But, if we confess our sins, God is faithful *and just*

(meaning, he won't demand more payment, for Christ has already paid it all) He is faithful and just, and *will* forgive our sins and cleanse us from all *un*-righteousness."

What a gloriously comforting Gospel in Christ alone.

Everything depends on this Jesus. There's nothing else to boast in – not works, not the fervency of prayers, not good Christian living (all of those things are good in sanctification, but contribute nothing to your justification before the Almighty God!) – there's nothing else to boast in; it is all excluded. Because faith needs only Jesus.

So then, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples." That's true. Apart from the Law and Gospel, how would we know the truth of what the world otherwise sees so dimly and poorly, as though trying to peer beneath the surface of the water. But, in the Scripture, in Christ's Divine Word to you, "you will know the truth" – the truth of your sin, the truth of your salvation, the truth of that forgiveness fed and sustaining you each week, the truth that elicits faith in God and fervent love toward one another – "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

In the Name of the Father
 And of the Son
 And of the Holy Spirit.
 + AMEN +