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John 8:31-36
Reformation
October 25, 2020

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 are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Reformation is an occasion often observed as if a Lutheran political Independence Day of sorts. And, on the doorstep of national and state elections that are touted as being the most consequential in your lifetime, it's understandable (I suppose) if hearers of the Gospel Reading lock in to the promise that "the truth will set you *free*." Indeed, if you hear it that way, and if you consider the observance of the Reformation a day of churchly politics, you're not alone: Radical contemporaries of Martin Luther – names like Ulrich Zwingli and Thomas Muntzer – they considered the Reformation to be a political act of independence and died while fighting for their *freedom* from Roman authority; Muntzer led the 1525 German peasants revolt and, captured in the Battle of Frankenhausen, was executed. A few years later, 1531, Zwingli, died on the battlefield of Kappel, but with an ironic detail that perhaps gains some sympathy for this opponent of Christ's Sacraments:

As the story was reported by the pastor who succeeded him: Zwingli had been stricken with a mortal wound and, while the victorious enemy were looting fallen soldiers, he lay dying on the battlefield of Kappel. Catholic soldiers came upon him and asked whether he wanted a priest to be called to give him last rites. Ardently opposed to the Roman Catholic errors of salvation by human effort, Zwingli shook his head and silently refused. This angered the soldiers, who told him that – even if he wouldn't confess before a priest – he should at least have the love of the mother of God in his heart and call out to the saints. Again, he shook his head in refusal, and the Catholic soldier, labeling him a heretic, plunged a sword into Zwingli which killed him instantly.¹

In bittersweet irony, the freedom from Rome Zwingli sought was not the freedom from Rome he knew in death. Perhaps, had he listened to the words of Jesus in John's gospel, and to Luther's *proper* explanation of it, he would have been spared his battlefield death.

And, perhaps if we listen to the words of Jesus in John's gospel and the proper use of Law and Gospel regarding it, we wouldn't be so worried about a national election, nor so quick to

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-4/from-archives-zwinglis-death-on-battlefield-of-kappel-in.html>

observe “Reformation” as a churchly political Independence Day of sorts.

In our text, Jesus makes abundantly clear a few main points that our Reformation fervor might easily overlook: first, He points out that His Gospel (and, more broadly, His whole counsel of Law and Gospel) is something his hearers already have. He says, “If you remain in my Word, you are truly my disciples.” If you *remain/abide/hold fast to*. Let’s not overlook that. The Reformation is not an ongoing revolution of a continually new Gospel and Faith, an ever-after anarchy of individual interpretations; it’s a call to return to the unadulterated Word of Truth, the Holy Scriptures... not a revolution to something new, but a humble return to that which is already there, to remain in that which has *always been there...* to remain in and repent upon hearing and be reformed by and redeemed by God’s Word.

Yes, how many there are who *initially* hear *and have* the Gospel, who hear, “Jesus died for me,” and then according to their own Old Adam desires, twist and pervert that Gospel into something that it’s not (something new!) and thereby actually *leave* the true Gospel that they had! They leave the true Gospel because they do not read it in the context of the true Law, and both Law and Gospel having been lost, they no longer have either, but only have a fake god with a faux word.

We are not immune to such departure from the Word of Truth. Our daily lives are riddled with battlefield losses against Sin and seemingly mortal wounds inflicted by temptation and even with the enemy combatants standing over us, the devil reminding us we're not worth saving (our God won't hear us) and the world telling us to call upon the name of their fake gods and make use of their faux gospels instead. Do we not come crawling to this sanctuary each week having nothing to show for ourselves in this arena of the Fall other than pleading, "I a poor miserable sinner"?

Thus, by very definition, the 'Reformation focus,' if you will, is not, *first*, an evangelization of the faithless world and enemy combatants (though all Lutherans should desire that), but, historically, the Reformation focus is, first, a re-evangelization of the *Christian*, a re-catechesis of the baptized child of God and would-be theologian, a re-tooling and re-centering and re-sharpening and re-arming of proper faith in the doctrine of Christ by use of the one and only norm and source of truth: the *Word* of Christ: "If you abide in my word – remain there, dwell there, be taught there, inwardly digest there – that is what grounds and roots a disciple... remain *there*, and you will truly be my disciples," Jesus says. That's the first main point he makes.

The second is this: "You will know the truth." He doesn't qualify that word *truth*, as if a peculiar and narrow sliver of one truth among many truths. He simply asserts that you will know the truth.

When Pontius Pilate asks, “What is truth?”, he’s not appealing to theological academics, but to the fact that – at that time in Roman society - real, daily life had no concept of *truth* and everything that entails: moral absolutes? right and wrong? afterlife or no afterlife? heaven or hell? God or gods or no god at all? Ability to make sense of this world, or free-falling through one’s days of existence?

And, when Christ claimed before Pontius Pilate that He came into this world to bear witness to the truth, He wasn’t speaking of some pie-in-the-sky religious dogma that has no bearing on reality, but rather of the *divine reality of* and *governance over* and *meaning in* (and *freedom from!*) life in this broken world.

And, when Christ declared of Himself, “I am the Way, *the Truth*, and the Life,” He wasn’t speaking of some narrow sliver among all the various ‘truth claims’ throughout the ages, but rather was claiming that the entire existence of the whole world – your entire being – only makes sense, only has value, only is saved from futility and despair and eternal damnation... through Him.

“You will know the truth,” Jesus says, and isn’t that *exactly* so? Does the Word of God pull *any* punches? Doesn’t it tell you quite plainly that you are not righteous; no, not one of us... that we of ourselves are all condemned, worthy of rot and decay and corruption, sinners who bring to ruin anything and everything we touch, so that you have no bright outlook in what you can make of

eternity, even if you manage to scrape together some blip of happiness from your false gods and their faux gospels... it will all be taken from you by sin and death. Doesn't the Holy Law of God say that?

And yet, His Holy Word also unequivocally proclaims to you not to be despondent, nor despairing, nor doubting, nor self-determinative... for you have a Savior, you have One far better than you who has stepped in for you. You have the true God who has taken on flesh and blood and become man for you and laid down his life for you and paid the price of sin for you and – now victor over the enemy and Lord over *death* just as Lord over *life* – has raised Himself from the dead for you, that He might proclaim in his resurrection that his death has redeemed you, removed sin's worst consequences from you, and – in time and eternity – He will remove *all* of sin and its consequences from you! This valiant one, who fights for you and rescues you is none other than the same Jesus Christ who exhorts and encourages you that His Word is in your hearing and in your heart ... and exhorts you to hold fast to it, remain in it, abide in it, and rejoice that you are his disciple. Thus, "You will know the truth." Yes, the baptized know their Lord. The servants know their Master. The sheep know their Shepherd. The disciples know their Savior. That's the second point.

The third point?: "The truth will set you free."

The truth of sin and forgiveness indeed sets us free... sets our *conscience* free. Sets us free to live with proper expectations of ourselves and our neighbor; free to wrestle with the rightly burdened conscience to confess our sins without pride or self-defense or self-justification, but just to confess it and desire to be rid of it and know that Christ puts it away from us so that we may live with a free and clear conscience before God. Likewise, the truth sets us free to confess of our neighbor that he is equally a sinner redeemed by Christ and thus (as a fellow sinner) needs my patience, and (as a fellow redeemed) is promised my love. Yes, “free” are we before God, free to love my neighbor for his benefit from God, not for my benefit in the courtroom of God.

But, as we said, to know the truth is not just to know the truth about sin and forgiveness (as if that wouldn’t be treasure enough!). It is also to know the truth of creation, its design, its purpose, its daily life in the Fall... it’s to know the truth that frees us from being enslaved by and in bondage to this broken world... the truth that frees us to have proper expectations of this poor, difficult life – be they expectations of and hopes for worldly kingdoms (“no,” the 46th psalm tells us, “the nations will rage and kingdoms totter, but you will always have God as your refuge and strength.”)... expectations of and hopes for worldly kingdoms or of life’s riches and successes and happiness (“no,” the hymn teaches us, “take they

our life, goods, fame, child, and wife... though these all be gone, they yet have nothing won, the kingdom ours remaineth”).

You see, to be set free is even more broad than a free conscience before God (though that, of itself, is absolute and everlasting freedom!); but ‘to be set free by Christ is also to be given a right and true and proper understanding of daily life in this world, understanding of created-fallen-redeemed-“being-sanctified” life in this world, that we might learn to be of good cheer, even in *it*, for Christ has overcome this world and promises us a citizenship of a far better kingdom, that we might every day, and all our days, keep our eyes fixed on that New Jerusalem we await.

Yet, to be set free is also more important and more eternal than a true and proper understanding of daily life in this world; it’s even more importantly and more eternally the right and justification to have a free and clear conscience before God, for “if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.” The Son has shed his holy blood; the Son has paid the perfect atoning sacrifice; the Son has baptized us into and proclaimed to us this Gospel, that our ears and hearts may burn in faith; the Son feeds and sustains us in it by nothing short of His holy body and precious blood, that our faith may be emboldened, our focus undistracted, our fervor strong and divinely grounded upon the firm foundation. And because the Son gives us that clear conscience – sets us free from sin and accusation before the Holy God – then we may always know, even when we are chased

into isolation – as the dragon of Revelation chased the lady Church – and even when it seems ‘on earth is not the dragon’s equal,’ and even when we seemingly lay dying on the battlefields of life because it seems the foe has conquered us; nevertheless, we may call upon God with a clear conscience that He will not leave, nor forsake us. We may call upon Christ the valiant One, whose blood indeed has set us free, free to live as the people of God, free to die as the people of God, free in the face of death, to know we will rise again as the people of God.

Thus, with our eyes set on eternal life, we may live daily life with utter certainty in the Word of God and His promise that, though the mountains quake and fall into the heart of the sea, though the waters roar and foam, though the nations rage and the kingdoms totter, God in Christ will continue to be our mighty fortress, our refuge and strength, a very *present* help in trouble.

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

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