

Reformation Sunday – November 4, 2018

Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

John 8:31-32 (NIV)

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32) Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our congregation like many Lutheran congregations around world is celebrating Reformation Sunday. What does this mean? The Festival of the Reformation provides us with an opportunity to give thanks to the Lord for the blessings he provided for his church through men such as Martin Luther who by God's grace pointed the Church to the Scriptures and the Gospel message of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

As Lutheran Christians, we are profoundly grateful that God used Martin Luther and other reformers at various points in time to champion and clarify the Gospel message. It is that heritage of the Gospel that we especially give thanks for on this day.

You may recall that Luther was uncomfortable with the idea of those who followed his reforms being called "Lutherans." Call them Christians, he said, "*after all, the doctrine is not mine, nor have I been crucified for anyone*" (from "What Luther Says"). Far from starting a "new religion," as some would contend, Luther understood that all he did was return the Christian Church to the teachings of Christ and his apostles: Eternal salvation by *grace alone* through *faith alone* in *Christ alone*, a truth revealed to us in *Scripture alone*.

This morning, on the basis of words spoken by Jesus Christ, we would like to rejoice in the heritage passed down to us through the centuries by our Lord and His true followers like Luther and the other reformers. On this Reformation Day, let us

Give Thanks for Our Reformation Heritage

- 1. A Heritage of Truth**
- 2. A Heritage of Freedom**
- 3. A Heritage to Share**

Listen once more to the words of our text: "**To the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'**" Jesus equates true discipleship with following His teaching. Those who hang on to Christ's teachings will know *the truth*, and *the truth* will be *set free*. As disciples of the Lord we have been blessed with a knowledge of the truth.

"*What is truth?*" That's what Pontius Pilate asked Jesus after Jesus had told him, "*Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*" He wasn't the first person to pose the question. It's a question that philosophers and thinkers have been asking for hundreds of years. It's a question that has given rise to any number of different philosophies and world religions and systems of thought. It's a question that is being asked today. And it's a question that many people have decided has no real or absolute answer.

But in reality, it's not that hard of a question. Jesus Himself provides it for us in John chapter 14, where, in reply to a inquiry about the way to heaven, He said: "***I am the way and the TRUTH and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me...***" Later on, in John chapter 17, Jesus gives us additional information

on the subject. As a part of what we refer to as His High Priestly prayer, He prays for His followers and asks our Heavenly Father to *"sanctify them by the truth; YOUR WORD is truth."*

Put it all together and this is our conclusion: Jesus Christ is the TRUTH. All of God's Word is the TRUTH. And what both Jesus Christ and the entire Bible is all about is the TRUTH of the Gospel message.

- THIS IS TRUTH – Romans 3:21-25 (NIV): *But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. (22) This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, (23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (24) and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (25) God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood--to be received by faith.*
- THIS IS TRUTH – Romans 5:1-2 (NIV): *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (2) through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.*
- THIS IS TRUTH: Though undeserving, we who are born and practicing sinners become saints in the eyes of God. Through faith in Jesus Christ's perfect life and cruel death as our substitute and His glorious resurrection that substantiated His claim to be our Savior, we are forgiven all our sins. We are redeemed from hell. And we now enjoy a right relationship with God.
- THIS IS TRUTH: Heaven is ours. For the believer there are no doubts, no questions, no uncertainties as to where we will spend our eternity. Without a hint of arrogance or pride or self-righteousness, we can say that we are going to heaven when we die. The reason we can say this is because our eternal salvation does not depend on what we do for God, but entirely on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. In the words of the hymn Rock of Ages, *"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."*

When it comes to salvation, Jesus Christ is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And what follows this knowledge of the truth is... FREEDOM. Because of Jesus Christ we have been freed first of all from our sins. Let us make no mistake about it, freedom from (or forgiveness of) sin is mankind's greatest need. Putting it personally, it is our greatest need.

Now, the world is not going to tell us that. We live in a world that minimizes, rationalizes away, or redefines the whole idea of sin. But the fact of the matter is, sin against a holy God is serious business. The Bible tells us just how serious: sin damns. Which means, practically speaking, without forgiveness, nothing else really matters. With forgiveness, everything else becomes secondary. And thanks be to God, we have it, which makes a tremendous difference in our lives...

Let me give you an illustration. Do you remember the Bible story about the paralyzed man whose friends lowered him through the roof of the house that Jesus was teaching in? The crowd was so thick that these men had no chance of presenting their paralyzed friend to Jesus in the usual way, so they got creative...It's a compelling scene to try to imagine, but here's the point: once the man is there on the ground right before Jesus, the Lord speaks to him. But do you remember what He said? It's not what we might expect. He said, *"Friend, your sins are forgiven."* And it wasn't until that primary need was met that Jesus then turned His attention to the man's secondary need – his physical condition – and healed him.

I suspect that even if Jesus had not chosen to heal this man, that he would have gone away happy and at peace; because his greatest need – the spiritual need to know that his sins were forgiven – had been met. He was at peace with God.

Since this is Reformation Sunday, let me give you another illustration of the transforming effect of the Gospel message. Those of us even casually acquainted with the story of Martin Luther know there was a time when he, by his own admission, actually hated God. He saw God only as the Judge of sins, not the Forgiver. As a result, Luther was always trying to please God and earn His favor by doing things – even to the point of physically harming himself so God would know just how serious he was about pleasing Him. Those were dark days for Luther.

However, when Luther finally came to understand that God had freely and fully forgiven him all his sins by punishing Jesus Christ in his place, his outlook on life and God changed dramatically. He felt as if the gates of paradise were opened up to him. In the Gospel message of sins forgiven through Jesus Christ, He found peace. He experienced joy. He became acquainted with contentment.

To restate it: The forgiveness of sin, which translates into freedom from hell, is mankind's greatest need. And it is a need which has been met in Jesus Christ. Jesus provides us with a host of other freedoms as well. Let's briefly touch upon just a few of the things that believers in Christ are liberated from...

#1 – Freedom from worry and fear of the future. In Psalm 31, King David writes: *"My times are in your hands."* He is expressing the assurance all of us have that God is the One who is control of our lives. The apostle Paul teaches us that *"in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28 NIV) and that *"nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ."* (cf. Romans 8:35-39) What all this means to us is that we need not fear the future, because God will take care of us then just as He has in the past...

#2 – Freedom from a meaningless, unfulfilled life. If you think about it, those who – for whatever reason – don't know Christ as we do have it rough. They don't have a clue as to why they are here on this earth or how they got here in the first place. That must be very confusing. It's interesting to note that all of the attempts to answer life's questions without God as the starting point always end up drawing the same conclusion, namely, that there is no real meaning or purpose to life. Life is nothing more than some sort of cosmic accident. Not very appealing, is it?

We are freed from such a pessimistic outlook. As Christians we know that we are here on this earth at this particular point in time and space because this is what God has planned for us. We also know that our reason for existence is to glorify God in whatever we do and to help spread the Gospel message in whatever ways are open to us...

#3 – Freedom from the fear of death. Christians may have a fear of the dying process, but we know that for us death is but the door to eternal life. We know where we are going and that "heaven is our home." This is a freedom which, sadly, the unbeliever does not have.

All these freedoms – from the damning consequences of sin, from worry and fear of the future, from a meaningless life, and from the fear of death itself – are ours, because by God's grace we know the truth and the truth has set us free...

That truth and freedom is the legacy that has been passed on down to us by Christ and His true followers throughout the years. Truth and freedom is our heritage as Lutheran Christians. But just as this heritage has been passed on to us by others so it's our privilege and responsibility to pass it along. Parents and grandparents are often concerned about passing on a legacy to their children and grandchildren. Many times that legacy consists of a financial gift or a home or some other kind of property. Hopefully it will also include passing on some family traditions and values. But the most important heritage we can pass on to the members of our families is the heritage of truth and freedom that comes from the Gospel.

And that's really the legacy and heritage that we as members of a Christian congregation want to pass on to others. According to the Scriptures it is the Lord's will that we do not neglect the assembling of ourselves together but that we continue to do this so we can encourage one another. And according to the Scriptures it is the Lord's will that we as individuals and as a congregation are active in making disciples of all nations – sharing our reformation heritage of Truth and Freedom at home and abroad.

Truth and Freedom – that's our Christian legacy. Let us simply drink it in, rejoice in it, be consoled by it, share it and be compelled by it to live our lives to the glory of our gracious God. Amen.