

"You Will Know the Truth"

John 8:31-36

October 30, 2011

Reformation Sunday

Truth is sure taking a beating in our culture today. Many think there is no such thing as ultimate and unchanging truth. Therefore, you can never really be sure about anything. To be sure of anything is seen as being arrogant. Others, who might admit the possibility that truth exists, will say that knowing that truth is impossible. We can only have competing beliefs over what truth might be, all of which have some validity. To say your position is true and others are not is seen as being insensitive.

Therefore, Reformation Day seems to be both arrogant and insensitive to many people. For today we are bold to confess that there is one truth and we know that truth. We are not making this up. We are simply taking Jesus' promise in our Gospel reading today at face value where He says, "you will know the truth."

Obviously, this can be misunderstood. Some will accuse us of merely promoting Lutheranism or, worse yet, the rules of the Missouri Synod. Nothing could be more wrong. Something is not true because Martin Luther says it or because the Lutheran church teaches it. Nor do we simply invent doctrines and teachings and claim that they are true.

Something is true only when it comes from truth. Jesus prayed for His disciples on the night before He died and said, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." (John 17:17) The only way we can know the truth, Jesus says, is "If you abide in my word, then you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth." What we do here in our preaching and teaching is to confess the Word of God. "Confess", as we learned in Bible Class, means to "say the same as." When we confess the Word of God, we are saying the same as the Word of God says.

This leads to another misunderstanding. Are we saying that people in other denominations are not Christians or have no truth? Not at all. However, in confessing the truth of God's Word, we are

also compelled to confess the errors which the Word of God condemns. Some Christians and some denominations have departed from the truth have accepted and promote errors which the Word of God condemns. People are wrong, not because they disagree with us, but when they disagree with the Word of God. It seems to be politically incorrect to say that and, by saying that, breaks the peace and creates problems.

Luther faced the same dilemma when he was brought before the Emperor at the Diet of Worms in 1521. He had been saying that the Church was in error and the Church accused him of stirring up trouble by creating new doctrine. Luther could have kept the peace by taking back what he had been teaching and by stopping his accusations of the Church. However, when asked to do so at the Imperial Diet, he replied,

“Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

Why was Luther such a stickler for the truth? Why are we? It is not for the sake of winning a theological argument and proving we are right and others are wrong. It is not to promote Luther or the Lutheran Church. Martin Luther himself would have hated that and would have roundly condemned us if we were doing such a thing.

There is only one reason for knowing the truth, confessing the truth, and insisting on the truth. Jesus says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Truth for truth’s sake or to win an argument or to promote one’s self or one’s denomination is of no use and is likely sinful. Truth is important because it sets us free.

Sets us free? Like the Jews in our text, we may say that we are not enslaved to anyone or anything. We don’t need freeing. But Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” This leads us to the first lie which Satan wants you to believe: all people are

basically good. If not good, then people are morally neutral. That is the message our culture sends us. It is a message that is sometimes found within some Christian churches.

However, we confess the truth expressed in our Epistle reading today: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” There is no escaping this or denying this. You are sinful. I am sinful. Everyone who has ever been born into this world is sinful. Some might say, “But it’s not all that bad. It doesn’t enslave us. I’m still in control.” But it is that bad and it does enslave us. This sinfulness is more than a character flaw or weakness. It is the total corruption of every human being. God’s Word is clear when it says, “you were dead (not weakened) in your transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1) We are not in control. Sin is. Scripture says, “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.” (Rom. 8:7) We are, every one of us, enslaved to sin.

This is a hard truth to confess and accept in our world of self-esteem and self-affirmation. But it is a good and necessary truth for us to hear and believe. Just like a doctor’s diagnosis of a fatal disease is depressing and hard to take, but ultimately is good because it directs us to our need for treatment for that disease, so the truth of our sinful condition is good because it directs us to our need for treatment.

This is a truth that Luther knew full well in his day. He was miserable and depressed because he knew his sinfulness. If we are honest with ourselves about our sinfulness and fully aware of the consequences it brings – death and damnation – we will be in despair, too. What is the treatment, what is the cure for this fatal disease?

Here’s where the next lie of Satan comes in: you can do it. You can overcome sin by being good. If the sin is bad enough, you just have to be good enough. This was the solution Luther tried. He tried being good. He tried being a monk. He tried to placate God’s wrath by his religious actions. He tried to earn forgiveness for his sins by the performance of penance.

Many people today fall for that lie and try to live by it. If you ask people why God should let them into heaven, many will say, “I’ve tried to be good. I’ve tried to live by the golden rule.” Many

people are under the delusion that our good works will negate our bad works; that our religious actions will placate God's anger and earn His favor.

However, we confess the truth, also expressed in our Epistle reading today, which says, "[all] are justified (declared to be right in God's eyes) by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood." Our right standing before God is not earned by virtue of our good works or religious actions. It is given to us as a gift by virtue of God's grace – His undeserved and unmerited love for us. We could not pay the price. However, Christ Jesus could. He redeemed (paid the price for) each of us by His blood shed on the cross. "Propitiation" refers to the Ark of the Covenant which, when covered by the blood of the sacrifices, covered the people's sins. Christ Jesus' blood covers us in His holiness. His death earns for us the forgiveness for all our sins. His resurrection from death to life gives us life from death for all eternity. This is the greatest of all truths which we confess.

All are justified, yet all do not receive the benefits of that justification. How do we make sense of that? Some lies are: God predestines some people to heaven and some to hell. Some sinners resist God less than others. Some sinners make a choice for God. All of these are lies and dangerous lies because they can inflate our spiritual egos and lead us from Christ.

However, we confess the truth, also expressed in our Epistle reading today, that this justification is "to be received by faith." Faith is a very passive thing. It does not cause things. It receives things. It is not an act on our part. Ephesians 2 says "it is the gift of God". When water is placed on your head in baptism, when the word of forgiveness is placed in your ear through the Gospel, and when the body and blood of Jesus are placed on your tongue with bread and wine in Holy Communion, faith is given, strengthened, and reassured. Such a faith then is able to receive what Christ has accomplished: forgiveness, life, and salvation.

This truth which we confess gives us great comfort and assurance as we are tempted by the devil, influenced by a corrupt world, and struggle with our sinful flesh. Christ Jesus has won for us a

right standing with God despite everything we have done. He offers it to us freely by His grace apart from anything we have done. And he creates the faith to receive it through the Means of Grace..

So, let's hear it for truth, real truth, eternal true – the truth found in God's Word, the truth revealed to us by the Holy Spirit working through the Word, and the truth received by God's grace through faith which forgives our sins, brings us to God and each other, and promises us everlasting life. As Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free....So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." He has. We are. Amen.