

JOHN 8.31-36
AN EXPOSITION FOR
REFORMATION SUNDAY - 2003

The Truth That Sets Us Free

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. The reading that we will look at more closely is the Gospel reading for Reformation Sunday where we are told,

31 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."

What does it mean to commemorate the Protestant Reformation as we do today? Is it an occasion to celebrate centuries-old conflict? When I was in Scotland, the Orange Lodge would have an annual march to commemorate the battle of the Boyne. It was an annual occasion to hold up two fingers to the Roman Catholics and say, King William of Orange put one over the Irish, three hundred years ago and don't you forget it! Is that what celebrating Reformation Sunday all about -- celebrating sectarianism? I don't think so.

The very word 'commemoration' suggests memory. There is something about the Reformation that we want to remember, and never forget. If it takes an annual 'Reformation Sunday' to achieve that aim so be it. The important

thing is that we remember the rediscovery of the gospel. Reformation Sunday is about remembering how the gospel was rediscovered, so that it will never be obscured again.

If we look at the Reformation in the context of today's gospel reading we will see that in a way the Reformation conflict was only history repeating itself. If the Roman Catholic Church had learned the lesson Jesus was trying to teach the Jews, the Reformation conflict need never have happened.

Yet it did. What the Roman Church needed was an annual festival to commemorate Jesus' conflict with the Jews. It might have been called 'the truth shall set you free' Sunday. Be that as it may, we know that the Roman Church fell into the trap of enslaving believers to human works as the Jews had done over 1500 years before. It took a Martin Luther, studying the Bible, to rediscover the words of Jesus as they applied to Christian faith.

It would be an oversimplification, of course, but one could say that the Reformation was a quarrel between religious people, similar to the quarrel in our gospel lesson in which Jesus was involved. There are parallels between the respective disagreements in which Jesus and Luther were involved.

Both Jesus and Luther addressed people who were understood to be believers. St. John wrote that it was:

"To the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples etc."

Luther wrote to members of the Roman Catholic Church, people whom he assumed believed in Jesus and were interested in being Jesus' disciples.

Both Jesus and Luther tried to address the subject of the freedom of believers and how that freedom is obtained. Jesus tried to tell Jewish believers that if they held to His teachings:

"Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.."

Luther tried to tell Christians that if they but grasped the truth of the Gospel, they would be free from guilt, free from uncertainty, and free from sin.

Jesus' audience disputed what He said on the basis of their pride in their Jewishness. They saw within themselves the comfort and security they wanted without accepting Jesus' offer of freedom through His teachings. They answered Him,

"We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

Luther's audience too were self-righteous and self-secure. When Luther pointed to Christ as Saviour through His grace alone, by faith alone, he was rebuked by those who forbade him to tell them what to believe. They took pride in their loyalty to the Roman Church and its Pope.

They were proud of their complex system of holy works by which they could accumulate merit for themselves in God's sight. They had nothing but contempt for anyone who would chal-

lenge the rules that the Pope had laid down, regardless of what the Scriptures seemed to say.

The condemnation of the multitudes did not stop Jesus from His important proclamation. Against those who rejected the freedom He offered because of their pride, Jesus replied.

"I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Luther also was undeterred by those who would detract from the comfort of the Gospel by burdening people with the guilt of sins that Christ had already forgiven, nailing them to His cross. Retribution for the sins of world was finished by Jesus Christ, and He sealed that accomplishment with His blood.

The Good News is that we are saved, not by obeying some laws, but by trusting in the finished work that Christ did for us when He was crucified and rose from the dead. Luther was simply proclaiming this Good News -- the Gospel that is the basis of our faith. Yet he had to admit that:

"The pope, however, prohibits this faith, saying that to be saved a person must obey him. This we are unwilling to do, even though on this account we must die in God's name."

Perhaps you have noticed that there seems to be a pattern involved in proclaiming the Good News. It often gets rejected for much the same reasons in

whatever century it is proclaimed. Need we remind ourselves that the Good News is largely rejected today?

Everybody has their reasons for rejecting the Good News. The most common one that I have discovered, is much the same as that which our Lord Jesus discovered and which Martin Luther also encountered at the Reformation. It is the reason that is given by Jesus' audience in today's Gospel reading. The reason is that the people felt they didn't need the Good News.

"We have never been enslaved to anyone, How can you say that we shall be set free?"

They felt they didn't need God's gracious provision to rescue them from the present course of their lives. They were all right as they were, thank you very much.

By the Grace of God, however, there have always been some who disagreed with that prideful attitude. Jesus did have hearers who humbled themselves and who put their faith in Him. Martin Luther's call for repentance and reformation was heeded by some, and it is because of this that we are here today as Lutheran Christians.

For those who appreciate the Good News that God has provided forgiveness for people through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ --

For those who appreciate that He has brought real freedom from sin and

guilt, the work of Christ, [and the Reformation which honoured that work] was not in vain.

Despite the polemical reputation of Jesus and his disciple, Martin Luther, and unlike sectarian causes, Christianity is ultimately not about arguments and taking sides. The Christian faith is about having faith in the Good News of which Jesus Christ Himself is the object and focal point. And the Christian faith is having the humility to place all our pride and selfish hope aside. The Christian faith is a matter of taking Jesus up on his offer of freedom and relief from the consequences of our own sins and shortcomings. Jesus taught,

"I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

One doesn't have to be a Lutheran to see Jesus' point about sin – (but it helps). It helps to be a Lutheran because we Lutherans don't leave our Bibles or Jesus behind as we struggle to come to terms with the issues of good and evil that we face every day (around us and within us). We don't leave the Word of God behind because we know we need to the truth.

Only the truth will set us free. And that truth is the Word of God, as Jesus himself believes. Our world needs to know what Jesus said about truth. We need to tell a world that claims to be in-

terested in truth that Jesus did not say 'If you hold to somebody's religious teaching you'll know some truth'.

“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.’”

And thank God that being a Lutheran is more than just being part of a religious denomination or sect, as Jamile, and all our confirmed members, should have been taught.

Being a Lutheran is building our lives around the truth. It is having what Jesus called a permanent place in the family, the undeserved status of a son or a daughter of God. FORGIVEN INDEED, CERTAIN INDEED, FREE INDEED. AMEN.