

Truth and Freedom

Text: John 8:31-36

Hymn: "Salvation Unto Us Has Come" (*LSB 555*)

October 31, 1517: Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. Or perhaps he simply mailed them. Either way, Protestants all over the world, especially Lutherans, have been commemorating this event annually since at least the 1700s. People look at us and sometimes get the impression that we worship Martin Luther instead of Jesus. But we are not about hero worship, as if somehow the man Luther was inerrant and infallible. He, a sinner like the rest of us, full of pride and envy and other evil desires, didn't and couldn't save anybody. So, if that's what you're looking for today, you've come to the wrong place.

This day in many respects has become an excellent opportunity to remember and study and commemorate the history that surrounds the Reformation. And that's a good thing. You cannot understand many of the sociological, economic, political institutions we take for granted today unless you have some grasp of what happened at the time of the Reformation. But if that's what you came here for today, you've also come to the wrong place. Try taking a Western Civ course.

When we come to the divine service, we come to hear the truth. As we gather in God's house, we expect the Holy Spirit, through a bumbling fallible preacher, to proclaim the truth to us. What is truth? That question's been around for a long time and is still very much with us. If your mailbox is like mine, it's been inundated lately with campaign flyers and attack ads. What do you believe? Whom do you believe?

In the political realm you will always have this unanswered question: What is truth? The politician Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" because he could not

accept that there was such a thing as theological, God-given truth.¹ Pontius Pilate was asking, “What is truth?” of the very one who is the Truth and the Way and the Life.

And that leads us into the familiar words of our text this morning: “If you know the truth, the truth will set you free.” These are words that sometime get used to justify things we want to do but we know are against the rules: Well, Jesus set me free. But the context of these words tells a different story. John 8. An amazing chapter. At the beginning of it, we have the woman caught in the act of adultery. She’s caught. She’s dragged out into the public square. People pick up stones to kill her. Remember what Jesus says? “Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone” (v 7). And one by one they drop their stones and walk away (v 9).

Then Jesus did the unthinkable. He forgave the woman her sin. Who does this Jesus think He is? God? A man who forgives sins?! The controversy surrounding Jesus in the entire Gospel of John and especially here in John 8 revolves around the forgiveness of sins. The entire controversy at the time of Reformation surrounded...the forgiveness of sins! Every problem that goes on in the church today at its core has to do with the forgiveness of sins.

That should teach us something. We best get the forgiveness of sins right before we move on to anyone else. In John 8, the people, the high and mighty, were ready to stone the woman caught in adultery. They were quick to point out her sin. But they wanted to hear nothing about their own sin. They could not see the sin in their own

¹ If Jesus gave an answer, the Gospel of John does not record it, but a clever person over a millennia ago suggested that Jesus replied by rearranging the letters of the question: *Quid est veritas? Est vir, qui adest.* What is truth? He is the man who stands before you.

lives. These men, who were ready to commit murder, could justify their sin because the woman caught in adultery was a sinner. How different really are we?

Jesus goes on in John 8 to declare one of His majestic “I am” statements. This time, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (v 12). He then explains what it means to have Jesus, the “light of life” dwelling in them, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.” So the Jews said, “Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come?’” He said to them, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (vv 21-24). This entire chapter is about Jesus’ great love for sinners. He does not want anyone to die in their sin. That is why Jesus came.

And He is explaining to them how the Light of the World is going to bring this about: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me” (v 28). When I am lifted up, you will know that I am He. When I am lifted up, you will know that I have authority. When Jesus Christ is lifted up on the altar of the cross, offering himself as the ransom for the sins of the world, then you will know that He is the Savior of the world, that He is your Savior.

“And as He was saying these things, many believed in him” (v 30). The power of the Word of God to create faith that apprehends the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! The people heard the word of God. They believed it. This is the context of our Gospel reading today, which begins, “Jesus said *to the Jews who had believed him*, ‘If

you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.” In other words, “It’s not enough that you believe in Me right now.” You need to continue to believe in me. You need to *abide* in my word. Because unless you die in me, unless you die in the faith, unless you die trusting that my blood covers your sin, you will die in your sin.

But “if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Oh, if only Jesus had not said that last part! The people *then* didn’t want to hear it. People *now* don’t want to hear it. Set me free? Set me free from what? How dare you! I’m not a slave. I’m not a slave to anybody. I’m free. I can do whatever I want.

We have no idea what these people were thinking when they told Jesus “we’ve never been slaves of anyone.” They had been slaves on and off for about the last 1500 years. At the present time they were paying tribute and taxes to Caesar. They weren’t free. But they thought they were. I guess they had their truth the same way we have ours. And Jesus’ truth is yet something different.

We may not know what the people in our text were thinking, but we know exactly what Jesus was. Jesus’ words are clear: “Truly, truly, I say to you, Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” Shall we have a show of hands on that one? Anyone here ever commit sin? That’s you. That’s me. That’s everyone who has ever lived, everyone who ever will live, everyone alive right now.

And everyone who sins is a slave to sin. That’s all of us. We try to deny it. We pretend it isn’t true. In fact, an astonishing amount of our thought life is given over to recognizing the sin around us—the sins of others—but very little in recognizing the sin in ourselves. But that doesn’t change the truth that we are slaves to sin. We can hide

behind psychology or sociology. We can say I was born that way. (And you were—it's called original or inherited sin.) You can blame your parents or Western civilization or your third grade teacher. Hide behind whatever you want, but everyone who sins is a slave, is in bondage, to sin. And Jesus is here warning us that if we don't take sin seriously, it's impossible to get salvation right.

We do everything we can to take the sting and the poison out of sin. And yet we see the consequences of our own sin and we know in our heart that the ultimate consequence of sin bites us, that sin is real, that sin stings. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law" (1 Cor 15:55-56) The power of the law affects us all.

"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"! The truth does not stop with our sin. The truth continues and sin is swallowed up with the ultimate truth of the Sin-Bearer, the God-man, born of the virgin, born to die, who comes down to carry the world's sin on Himself and in Himself, bleeding and dying on Calvary's Cross, rising from the dead, never to die again, adopting you into His family through the waters of Holy Baptism, robing you with the robe of righteousness, feeding you with His body and blood, sustaining you for the journey. This is the truth! God's love never ends! God's love sent Jesus to die for you! God's love wants you to be in the truth and to live in this freedom that only Jesus Christ can give.

There is no other Gospel than Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world. There is no other hope than the hope that is in the blood of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for you. This is the truth! This is more than the truth of the Reformation. This is the truth of God's Word.

And this truth sets you free. It sets you free to love God. It sets you free to be at peace, no matter how great your sin. It sets you free to love your neighbor as yourself. This is the freedom that Jesus Christ won for you. The Son has set you free. You are free indeed. That's the truth. Thanks be to God!

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