

10/27/19 19th Sunday after Trinity, Reformation Sunday

Jesus says to us, “Abide in My word!”

John 8: 31-36

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.

And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free?’”

Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.’ And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever.

Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

On October 31 of the year 1517, Martin Luther—at the time a member of the Observant Augustinian Order of Mendicant Friars and also the Professor of Scriptural Studies at the still young University of Wittenberg—nailed to the door of the Castle Church some papers on which were written ninety-five theses intended for a public, academic debate. Those theses dealt with issues involving what it really means for the Christian to repent, and what prompted Luther to write them was the Roman Church’s practice of selling “indulgences” to people. Officially, those “indulgence papers” only freed the buyer—or their relatives—from the temporal punishment for their sins which they thought had to be paid in Purgatory. The people, however, understood the buying of these indulgences as simply the purchase of the Lord’s forgiveness for money. In fact, in his sales-pitch for them, the huckster John Tetzel would proclaim, “As soon as the coin in the money box clings, a soul from Purgatory springs.” Luther was not the only one at the time who was repulsed by such obvious charlatanry. We celebrate his posting of those theses on true repentance because his action that day set in motion the church-shaking movement which we call the Reformation.

Every year, Reformation Sunday provides an opportunity for us to consider the question which the great 20th-Century theologian Herman Sasse asked his wide readership in Germany and in America, “*Was heißt ‘lutherisch?’*”—really, “What does it mean to be Lutheran?” Surely, what we have received from Luther and his successors must be a part of the answer to that question and a reason that we give heartfelt thanks today—an

insistence that Scripture alone is the source of our creedal faith, a return to and a cleansing of the historic liturgy with Word and Sacrament at its center, a rich legacy of hymns that resonate with the truth about Trinity and the Incarnation and the Atonement, Luther's Catechism—that treasure of teaching that equips us for a life of faith and prayer and sacramental worship, the Book of Concord—the Book of the Lutheran Confessions—with those magnificent statements of faith which have served as clear and reliable standards and guides for countless pastors and teachers, and so much more. What value for us these gifts may have is really anchored in the words of Christ Jesus in our text, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” That is really how Herman Sasse answered his own question. Along with our thanksgiving today, it must be our prayer—for ourselves and for the Church of Christ—that we “abide in His Word,” and that we live in and treasure the true “freedom” which only His Word can give.

I

“The truth shall make you free,” Jesus says. And his hearers respond with defensive vehemence, “We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free?’” They apparently missed the heavy irony in their words—Judea had been subject to one nation after another for centuries, and now they were ruled by the Romans. But Jesus is not speaking here about political freedom. The bondage from which He had come to free His hearers—the bondage from which we, too, need to be set free—is the slavery to sin and to Satan and to the grave into which we are simply born.

One aspect of Luther's recovery of the truth of Scripture was that he took seriously what the prophets and the apostles had taught about that bondage—about our real need for a Savior. He recovered again for us what great church-fathers like St. Augustine had learned from their study of Jeremiah and St. Paul. He read in Scripture that the bondage into which we are born goes far beyond what we can see in ourselves. The depth of our fallenness; the degree to which Satan rules over us; the extent of death's sovereignty over us without Christ—all this is a mystery which goes far beyond even the very worst that we can see in ourselves or in others. It is a mystery that must be learned from Scripture and accepted in faith. What Luther learned is that the Gospel is directed to us who in penitence realize that we bring nothing to the table when we seek the Lord's forgiveness, that we can earn nothing from Him, that—like the tax-collector in Jesus' parable—we can only bow our heads and ask for His mercy.

II

“The truth shall make you free,” says our Savior. The freedom which Luther discovered in Scripture comes to us by God’s pure grace alone. It is—and it must be—His gift to us.

It has been accomplished for us and is offered to us by Christ alone. Only Mary’s Son who is God’s Son could live the perfect life of love that the Law of God demands from us. Only the divine-human blood which He shed for us on the cross of Calvary could atone for our sin and for our whole condition of sinfulness. Only Christ Jesus, crucified and risen for us, could put an end to that dreadful slavery into which we are born. Only our incarnate Savior can speak the Word which sets us free.

And the freedom which He offers to us does not become ours through anything we do. We receive His forgiveness and His life only through faith—only by trusting in Him as our Savior, only by relying on His Word of truth that makes us free.

Grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone—these phrases are not empty slogans. What these words meant for Luther and what they mean for us is that we can be absolutely certain of the freedom of which Jesus speaks here, because it does not depend on us. It is the work of our Savior/God alone. “If the Son makes you free, says our Savior, “you shall be free indeed.”

III

Jesus says, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.” That is the task which this day sets before us.

That, too, is not something which we can perform by ourselves. The record of those who have called themselves “Lutheran” in these last five hundred years has been—and let us be kind here—somewhat checkered. Not everyone who has received the legacy of the great Reformer has appreciated and worked to preserve that legacy. So many have turned away from that simple Word of the Cross—that Word of forgiveness and life only in Christ Jesus, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”—because they have preferred the siren-song of other, more modern doctrines and other, more human-centered philosophies. It was Martin Luther himself who compared the saving Gospel to a rain-cloud that brings water to thirsty soil for a while and then moves on because human beings stop cherishing it. And therefore we do not want to engage in the kind of prideful chest-thumping and parochial boasting which too often can attend the observance of this day. By our own strength, we cannot abide in the Word of our Savior and remain His disciples. He must do that for us. It is His Holy Spirit who must guard and keep us in the true faith. That is why this day must always be for us a day of earnest prayer.

Where the Lutheran Church has remained strong—not wealthy or large but strong in the way that truly matters, strong in Christ’s Word and in the freedom which He alone can give—her strength is the result of “abiding in His Word.” As one of his first projects after being condemned by the Roman Church, Luther translated the New Testament into the language of the people, and he went on to translate and to publish in the vernacular all of the prophetic and apostolic writings. We have those same Scriptures; through daily devotions we can make that Word more and more familiar to ourselves and to our children. We have Luther’s Catechism—it can be a regular work of love for us to review its wonderful summaries of what Scripture teaches about the Creed and about prayer and about the sacraments. We have that rich legacy of hymns from Luther and Gerhardt and Kingo and others—we can be faithful in attending worship and singing those Gospel-filled hymns with our fellow members.

And we can pray—daily and in earnest—that the Lord would help us to “abide in His Word,” help us to be faithful to that precious Gospel, help us to hold that life-giving Word in our hearts and minds, help us to work together in sharing that saving truth with others. “If you abide in My word,” Jesus says, “you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

May the Holy Spirit grant that true freedom to us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.