

October 29, 2023 (Reformation Day) – Romans 3:19-28 & John 8:31-36

Our Gospel lesson today talks about two concepts: truth and freedom. Both of which are absolutely precious to us.

Truth is incredibly valuable. We want others to tell us true statements, not lies. We want what we hear on the radio, see on TV, or read on the internet to be true. We talk about truth in advertising. We are rightfully concerned that politicians and government officials speak truthfully. Such that there is now an entire industry made out of fact checking everything they say. We almost obsessed with learning the truth about certain historical events. About what *really* happened. And the possibility of conspiracies that no one has considered.

And as Americans, we of course value freedom. We treasure our liberties: the freedom to worship without persecution from the government, the freedom to vote for the candidate of our choice, the freedom to speak our minds in the public square, and so forth. We treasure our freedoms most especially when we think about those living in countries with oppressive governments that don't allow such freedoms.

Yes, truth and freedom are both precious. People have fought and died for the sake of one or the other, and sometimes for both together. And so we turn to our text for this Reformation service and what it says about truth and freedom.

Of course the word “truth” in our passage from the Gospel of John is not being used in an ordinary sense. Jesus is not just talking about a single true statement. He is talking about THE truth: the ultimate truth, the highest truth, the truth that is of greatest importance for every human being. Jesus doesn't simply say that “truth” as a concept sets you free. He says that “the truth” – the truth that only he can reveal – that is what sets you free.

Every single human being needs the truth. Every single human being needs to be set free. So what is this truth? And why is it so important?

Well, to begin with, it's the truth of reality. And not just physical reality. Not just the reality that our senses can perceive or that science can describe to us. It's the truth of a spiritual reality beyond sight, sound, taste, or touch. The truth that there is a God. The truth of who this God is. As our school children just sang for us: “God is great. God is good. God made all that we see.” Including you and me.

But there are also things that God made that we can't see. And so from God's Word we learn the truth of heaven and hell. And the truth of where we fit into this reality. That we are fallen creatures, spiritually lost and condemned. Blind to the spiritual forces at work all around us.

And since this is a truth that Jesus needs to give to us, then it follows that we don't have it by nature. Part of Christ's truth is that we are born as creatures without the truth. And if we are lacking the truth, then we are creatures with only a lie. We are deceived. We are deceived by the deceiver. By the father of lies. By the devil.

And so we use our senses – we see and hear and taste and touch – and we are convinced that this is all there is. That there is no God who has given me his Law. That there is no such thing as sin and righteousness. That there are no such places as heaven or hell. We are lied to. And we believe it. Because we are not born with the truth.

And even when we see past that veil of deception and accept that there might be something beyond what we can see with our eyes, we're still deceived. In poll after poll of Americans, for decades now, the majority have said all religions are valid. We are a country that insists upon being broad-minded and tolerant. That it really doesn't matter what a person believes as long as he or she is sincere in that belief. That there are many different roads that lead to heaven. But once again, we are being deceived.

In our text, Jesus is speaking to a crowd of Jews. Some of them believe in him. They have the truth and Jesus is pointedly speaking to them. Some in that crowd do not believe in him. They are very much deceived.

And when they hear Jesus' words, they are upset. Because Jesus tells them that only the truth can set a person free. Which, just as the opposite of the truth is a lie, the opposite of freedom is slavery. And, really, no one likes being told that they're a slave. It's a degrading, dehumanizing title. It means that you are not a person. You're property.

These unbelieving Jews who heard Jesus did not like the implication that they were slaves. All the more so because they thought it was impossible for them to be slaves. They were the physical descendants of Abraham, after all. God's chosen people. The same people with whom God had made his covenant.

And as God's chosen people, they were convinced that they had never been in spiritual bondage to anyone or anything. They were not slaves to idols like the Gentiles were. They lived what they thought were outwardly good and ritually clean lives. Lives that kept them free from the corruption that marked those wicked, unclean Gentiles. Or so they thought.

But they were deceived. Whether by the devil or just their own human pride, they believed a lie. The fact that they were Abraham's physical descendants would not save them. John the Baptist had been warning them about that for years. *"Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham,"* he tells them in Matthew 3.

Nor were they as good as they thought they were. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount made that abundantly clear to them. Good enough is not good enough. *"You... must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,"* he warns them.

But this shouldn't have come as a surprise to them. The book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament had already told them, *"Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins."* No one is without sin. Not the unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day. Not you or me.

*"Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin."* And since we have all sinned, we are all slaves to sin. No one left to himself is righteous before God. No one can earn salvation. *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

Interestingly, though 1500 years separated them, Martin Luther, in the early part of his life, lived under the same lie as the Jews who did not believe in Jesus. As a monk in the Roman Catholic Church, he was taught, and he believed, that a person could earn God's favor and salvation by performing good works. Luther thought that his salvation depended on what he did, that he had to win his salvation, that everything depended on his own efforts.

And it absolutely tormented him that no matter how good he tried to be, he still sinned, and that he could never do enough to earn God's favor. He knew he was a slave of sin. And it truly made him wonder whether he could ever be saved. Whether anyone could ever be saved.

He needed the truth. Not just a truth. But the truth. The truth of God's Word. The truth, specifically, of Jesus' promise. *"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

Luther was absolutely right. He could not free himself. No one can free themselves. As Paul writes in our Epistle, *"By works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."* Doing good works cannot free you from slavery to sin because the more good works you do, the more sinful you realize you are. That's the exact spiral of works and guilt that Luther found himself in over 500 years ago.

No, a slave can't free himself. Freedom has to come from outside of him. He has to be freed by the one with authority over him. And when Jesus died on the cross and rose again for your salvation, all authority in heaven and on earth was given to him. He is the one and only judge of the living and the dead.

And He has set you free. He has declared you free of your sin. He has declared you justified and forgiven in God's sight. He has washed you clean in his own blood. And so you are free indeed.

Today, in this Reformation service, we rejoice that, by God's grace, Martin Luther recovered "the truth." Christ's Word. The Gospel.

And now, we abide in that Word. We remain in that wonderful Gospel message. The Good News that I am not justified by my works. I am justified by faith apart from works of the Law. I am justified by faith in the Son who sets me free and invites me to remain in the household of God forever. Amen.