

October 29, 2017 – John 8:31-36

Mark Twain once said, “The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them.” It's a rather profound statement, when you start to think about it. At the end of the day, a person who can read good books, who is able to read, but chooses not to, has put himself into the same situation as someone who is completely illiterate.

Mark Twain was not a Lutheran. Far, far from it. But this is a quote that I think would have resonated with Martin Luther. Although, Luther would have tweaked it just slightly. The man who does not read God's Word has no advantage over the man who can't read God's Word.

Much of the Reformation, which began 500 years ago, and which we celebrate today, was about Martin Luther's passion to bring God's Word to the people. Luther was absolutely convinced that it was the right of every Christian to hear and know God's Word. And it was the church's first and foremost responsibility to bring that Word to the people.

For Luther, and for us today, God's Word is the starting point for everything we do. Every sermon we preach. Every doctrine we teach. Every sacrament we consecrate. Every decision we contemplate. Everything we believe, teach, and confess rests on the inspired words of Holy Scripture.

And yet, for the Roman Catholic church of 1517, that devotion to the Bible was a foreign concept. Most of the people couldn't read. Those who could read usually couldn't afford a Bible of their own.

And around Germany every Sunday, there were priests entering pulpits to preach on a book they had never actually read. To conduct a service in Latin that no one in the sanctuary could understand. To a people who gained more comfort and understanding from the statues, paintings, and stained glass all around them than they did from the words of the mass. It was an abysmal situation.

And it didn't change overnight. Eleven years after Luther first posted those 95 theses on the door of the Wittenburg Castle Church, Luther would travel around to visit the churches of Germany. And he found that although the Reformation was already in full swing, very little had changed for the local pastor and the common man.

Because even with the power of Rome lifted from their churches, they still didn't have the Word of God. Which is why Luther published the Large and Small Catechisms. So that even if you didn't know anything else in God's Word. Even if you didn't understand anything else about the Bible. You would at least have the 10 Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord Prayer, and a basic understanding of Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper.

Luther couldn't give them everything. He couldn't retrain every priest in Germany. He couldn't provide Bibles to every home in Europe. But at least he could give them the Catechism. Because God's Word meant everything to Luther. It meant everything to the Lutheran Church.

So here's the hard question: Does it mean everything to you? Because the man who does not read God's Word has no advantage over the man who can't read God's Word. An educated American in 2017 with a Bible on his bookshelf who doesn't read it has gained nothing over an illiterate German peasant in 1517.

Luther writes in the Small Catechism, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.”

When we think of the Sabbath day, we usually think just about coming to church on Sunday morning. But you'll notice, it's not just despising preaching that we're warned about. It's also about despising God's Word. Remembering the Sabbath day is about holding God's Word sacred every day of your life. About being glad to hear and learn it – yes, at church on Sunday morning, absolutely – but also every other day of the week too.

Which is something that a great many Christians have forgotten. We often talk about the moral decay of America. About sex on television and violence in movies and materialism in our culture. And those are all true.

But I'm convinced the biggest moral decay in America right now is the loss of God's Word in our homes. You wanna know why we have so few young people in our pews on Sunday morning, here or anywhere else? It's because if you're not taught to hold God's Word sacred on Monday through Saturday, you're not going to hold it sacred on Sunday either. If you're not taught to gladly hear and learn God's Word in your home, you're not going to gladly hear and learn it at church either. That's the painful truth.

Jesus tells us in our Gospel Lesson today, *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples."* To be a disciples of Jesus Christ is to abide in God's Word. To live in God's Word. To stay there every day of your life. To make it a part of everything you do. To stick with it even when the world tries to pull you away.

And when we live in God's Word, we learn the truth. But it's an interesting truth that we learn. Because, you'll notice, Jesus doesn't say, "You will know the truth and knowing the truth will set you free." We kind of assume that in our mind. Rephrase it without even realizing it.

But that's not what he says. No, he says, *"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* There's a truth that has set us free – a gospel, a good news, that has set us free – whether we know it or not. To be Jesus' disciple is to abide in His Word, and so learn of this truth that has set us free. But it was not of my own reason or strength that I was given that freedom. Quite the opposite.

Jesus explains this further a few verses later. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."* You commit sin. I commit sin. We were born slaves to sin. And all those who die as slaves to sin will find themselves kicked out of the Father's house. Abandoned to the darkness of death and hell.

Because a slave does not remain in the house forever. Only the son remains forever. Only the son can set us free from our slavery to sin. Only the Son of God – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – did set us free. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. So if the Truth sets you free, you will be free indeed.

We are sinners. And we have so often failed to hold God's Word sacred and gladly hear and learn it. We have so often failed to take advantage of all that Martin Luther fought so hard to give us 500 years ago. We have so often failed to abide in God's Word.

But the Truth has still set us free. Though we do not come to the Word as we should. The Word came to us. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. The Word stood in front of us and said, "You will be free indeed." And then he hung on a cross to set us free.

Though we do not come to the Word. The Word came to us. And the Word still comes to us. Right there in that font, where we are reborn of water and the Word. Right there on that altar, in the true body and blood of our Lord.

Though we have so often despised preaching and our Lord's Word, he has not despised us. No, on the contrary, He has set us free. He has made slaves to sin into sons of God. And he has told us that we may remain in his house forever.

500 years ago, the reformers declared with confidence, *"Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum."* The Word of the Lord endures forever. For 500 years it has indeed endured. In preaching, in teaching, in study and sacrament.

And the Word will endure forever. Not because of how well we know it or how often we read it. But because that Word isn't just a book on a shelf. It is the living, breathing body of our Lord. Risen from the dead. And with us always until the end of the age. Amen.