

October 29, 2017  
Reformation Day (Observed)

“Abiding in His Truth”

John 8:31-36

Jesus proclaims, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

It’s real easy to understand why this Gospel reading is what is chosen for Reformation Day. Martin Luther was tormented by his fear of condemnation for his sins, a fear that the Roman Catholic Church was more than happy to capitalize on to maintain power and profit. Not that there weren’t any sincere priests and teachers in the church, but the teaching was that all were slaves burdened by the yoke of their sin until the sinner, not Christ, atoned for that sin.

What freed Luther, and ultimately millions of others, from this terror? It was the truth—the truth of the Word; the truth of the Gospel; the truth of Christ. *“The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift.”*

Full and complete forgiveness of all sins is God’s free gift in Christ—His very purpose for sending Christ into human flesh! This simple truth sent shockwaves through Christendom and much of the doctrinal house of cards Catholicism had built on man-made teachings began to crumble. Luther’s translation and publication of the Bible into German and subsequent translations into other languages let the truth of Scripture have free reign. Inevitably even Roman Catholic practice had to surrender some of its abuses to the Reformation influence.

Today we mark the Reformation’s freeing of the Gospel, but it is also a day of warning. How is it that the Roman Catholic Church became so far afield of what Holy Scripture teaches? By not abiding in the truth of Holy Scripture. Popes’ pronouncements, Council rulings and just some influential person’s idea, speculation, or translation error gaining steam over time profoundly diverted and hijacked right teaching and belief. Later, when someone would appeal to Scripture for a correction, the Word of God wasn’t allowed to rule the day. The status quo was more comfortable, maybe even more profitable.

Luther wasn’t the first to object. He was just the first whose objections were allowed to survive and have free course and reveal the church was not abiding in the Word of truth, but had given itself over to earthly fancy.

We Lutherans are quick to point out the folly of believing in the word of popes and councils and doctrines of men. But let me ask you this, do you know what the Bible says about you being righteously angry at someone? Do you know what the Bible says about you rendering your Holy Baptism powerless? Do you understand what conditions must be met for you to properly withhold forgiveness from somebody? (Pause)

Those were trick questions. If you’re angry at somebody you’re probably sinning, Holy Baptism never loses its power and Christians always forgive...period. Did you know all that? A lot of Christians think they can be angry if someone else offends them, that Baptism really doesn’t do a whole lot and that you only need forgive if somebody is sorry and they ask for your forgiveness.

You see, each one of us is at risk of doing exactly the same thing the Roman Church did—taking the things we want to believe, the explanations and rationalizations we design and

prefer, and letting them trump the truth of the Word of God. We easily settle into beliefs and behaviors we find comfortable, and we don't really care to hear it if God's Word conflicts with them. We like the status quo.

This is how Christian men and women are comfortable holding grudges against others, yet still think they are godly and good. This is how Christian couples come happily to pastor seeking to get married, feeling fine about having shared the same bed for years prior. This is how Christians can spout their love for God and neighbor, so long as that neighbor isn't an illegal immigrant, a Muslim, a liberal or an Alabama fan.

Absent the knowledge of what the Word of truth really says, people will develop views on sex, money, justice, prayer, worship, obedience, and yes, God Himself, that are nearly completely based on their own wants and desires, because that's just so much easier and comfortable.

"But I believe in Jesus! I have faith in Jesus!" one might respond. They quote Jesus own words, "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved!*" and say they believe.

Believe what? Jesus does not say, "Believe in whatever you want and stamp my name on top of it and you're good." Jesus says, "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*"

He doesn't say, "Abide in your faith in me and whatever you want me to be and say and do." He says you are to abide in His Word of truth. He says that those who present-tense abide in His **Word** are His present-tense disciples, and these will future-tense know His truth and that truth will future-tense set them free.

So let's get real uncomfortable here and ask yourself a question. Think honestly and soberly: Are you happily skipping through your life generally doing what you want, comfortably making accommodation for practices, feelings, beliefs and attitudes that are clearly or even just possibly outside of God's direction, but you're good with it because you believe and believing makes it all okay? Is that abiding in Jesus' Word, or is that simply putting your faith not in Christ, but putting your faith in your faith?

That's kind of a scary and sobering thought, isn't it.

"*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" These words are not law. They are all Gospel. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life—the Word that sets you free from sin, death and Satan—the Word that saves you.

Don't make the same old mistake of hiding this Gospel because this Word of Jesus is not a Word of power and profit according to the world. Don't refuse to abide in His Word because you prefer the world. That is the way of uncertainty, terror and ultimately death.

No, take a page from the playbook of the reformers. Seek the truth in the Word of God, and allow it to have free course in your life, both in its Law and its Gospel. If you feel it slapping up against something in your life, don't ignore it. Seek the truth and abide in it. Submit to it, knowing that it is the Word that saves you. If you think you know better...well, where does that leave you.

No, take a page from the reformers playbook. Seek the truth in the Word and discover the truth of the Gospel. The truth is that your faith does not save you. Your faith receives the Christ in all of His power, truth and love, and He is the one who died and rose to declare you free. Abide in Him as He comes to you, in His Word and Sacraments, and His truth does set you free. Amen.