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The Reformation of the Church

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The Truth Makes Us Free

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, the enemies of the gospel have worked to rob believers of their freedom in Christ. In his mercy God raised up men and women who defended the truth that makes us free from sin and slavery to Satan. Each year Lutherans remember these champions of every age, especially those who served at the time of the Lutheran Reformation. Today we thank God for the reformers and pray that people of our generation will continue to stand firm in the truth of God's Word.

Sermon

John 8:31-36

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Introduction – So what was bugging Martin Luther when he tacked those 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg? The first thing that bugged Luther was the idea of Purgatory. Purgatory was a place, the church said, where believers went after they died to suffer for their sins. When they suffered enough, they would go to heaven. Luther wasn't quite ready to deny Purgatory in 1517, but it didn't make sense to him. But what really bugged Luther was the idea that people could shorten their stay in Purgatory if they purchased an indulgence. An indulgence was a piece of fancy paper with the pope's signature on it. If you would buy an indulgence, you would get time off. This was the sales pitch: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, another soul from purgatory springs." That lie infuriated Luther and that's why he tacked the 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg.

There were two issues for Luther. The first issue was truth. Who speaks the truth: the pope or God? That was easy. In thesis 6 he wrote, "The pope cannot forgive any guilt, except by declaring and showing that it has been forgiven by God." To Luther no one but God determines the truth. In thesis 62 he wrote, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." The second issue was freedom. How do we gain freedom from sin: by faith or indulgences? Easy again. In thesis 36 and 37 he wrote, "Any truly repentant Christian has the right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters. Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters." Truth and freedom. Those were the issues that were on Luther's mind on October 31, 1517 when he tacked the 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg.

1517 was just the beginning. Martin Luther kept working and writing and preaching and teaching for the next 29 years, but the issues never changed: Truth and freedom. Thousands of teachers followed his lead and millions of people agreed with his teaching, but the issues never changed. Truth and freedom were the cornerstone of the Reformation: By grace alone; by faith alone; by Scripture alone. And that's why the words of Jesus in today's Gospel from John 8 are so often read on Reformation Day: **If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**

There is a lot more than history here. Truth and freedom are just as important in 2022 as they were in 1517. So that is the theme of the sermon this morning:

The Truth Sets Us Free

What is truth? Jesus' truth.

What is freedom? Jesus' freedom

1. The situation in the courtyards around the temple was more than tense. It was fall before the spring of Holy Week and the Jewish leaders had decided that Jesus was more than a distraction. Jesus was a threat and they needed to put an end to him. The Festival of Tabernacles was a big deal and faithful Jews were expected in Jerusalem but Jesus stayed away. He wasn't afraid but he had his own timetable. Then a few days later he showed up at the temple and that's when things got hot. Jesus spoke, the leaders argued, and the crowds heard it all. Some were sympathetic; some weren't. Some believed; some didn't.

And some were sitting in the fence. At a certain point Jesus turned and talked to the fence sitters. John calls them **Jews who had believed Jesus**. Jesus impressed them. They were basically on his side. They understood what he was saying and they agreed with most of it. But the old traditions and the old teachings were tough to shake and stuck to them like Superglue. Sympathizers? Absolutely. Disciples? Not so sure. Would they defend Jesus? Yes. Would they follow Jesus? Maybe, maybe not. So Jesus talked to them: **If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.** There was the issue. Jewish truth, the truth they had known since childhood, the truth that had controlled their lives for as long as they could remember—that truth or Jesus's truth.

Jesus told Pontius Pilate about the same thing: **I came to testify to the truth**, he said. Pilate sneered at Jesus: **What is truth?** Pilate wasn't the first to wonder about truth. What the serpent told Eve in the Garden of Eden sounded like truth to her so she ate the fruit, gave some to Adam, and sent the world crashing into sin. The Greek philosophers considered it absolute truth that the earth was flat and the center of the universe but we know how that turned out. The age of reason—we call it modernism—was convinced that only science can determine truth. What you can observe with your own eyes—that's truth. Post-modernism—that's where we are today—contends there is no truth at all except what is truth for you. The truth is that there is no truth.

We shake our heads and sputter and lament: what a terrible world we live in. But we fall into the same trap. Don't we dangle and drift between our own truth and Jesus' truth all the time? Jesus says **I will be with you always** but we worry because our truth insists we're all alone. Jesus says **You are my witnesses** but our truth says don't discuss religion with people you know. Jesus urges us to be rich toward God, but our truth wants to be rich toward us. Jesus says **I forgive all your sins**, but our truth makes us wonder if we can be sure. There are times in our lives when Jesus' truth almost seems to be fake news.

If you hold to my teachings, Jesus said, **you will know the truth**. The only truthful truth is truth that comes from God because only God is perfectly truthful. Jesus said to his Father, **Your word is truth**. Jesus taught God's truth so Jesus said, **I am the way, the truth, and the life**. The Holy Spirit placed Jesus' truth in the Bible so the Bible is Jesus' truth. No philosopher, no false teacher, no scientist, and no cynic can change that. We can't change that, either. The Holy Spirit leads us and all believers to confess, **All your words are true and all your righteous truth is eternal. What is truth? Jesus' truth.**

2. **The truth will set you free**. That's what Jesus said and that troubled the fence sitters. **We are Abraham's descendants**, they said, **and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?** That wasn't really true. The Jews had been slaves in Egypt and in Babylon and now they were slaves to the Romans. But that's not what they were thinking. The old traditions and the old teachings taught that their heritage and their obedience put them in God's good graces. Being a Jew made them free with God—or so they thought. Jesus set them straight. Being a Jew doesn't keep you from sinning and **everyone who sins**, Jesus said, **is a slave to sin**. He gave an example: **Now a slave has no permanent place in the family**. In the same way sinners have no place in the household of God. Sinners simply cannot have a relationship with God. That's just the way it is and that's just as true today as it was then. Sin separates us from God. We can be ever so nice and ever so pious, and ever so Lutheran, but if we sin—and we sin every day—if we sin, we're toast. **The soul that sins shall die**. That's God's truth.

And this is God's truth, too. **Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.** Jesus obeyed the laws God expected us to obey. He endured the punishment God expected us to endure. He died the death we were supposed to die. What Jesus did in our place cut through the chains that bound us, it unlocked the prison that surrounded us, it silenced Satan who hounded us. The empty tomb was our Emancipation Proclamation. We are not slaves anymore. We are God's sons and daughters now and we will live with God's family forever. Jesus said, **So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.** Free at last, we say, free at last. Praise God almighty we're free at last!

In 1941 Franklin Roosevelt listed four freedoms that he insisted were fundamental to people everywhere in the world: Freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Just about everyone agreed. But none of those fundamental freedoms is as fundamental as hell. People can be safe and still fear death. Everyone wants to be free: The Ukrainians and the Iranians, the diseased and the disabled, the liberals and the conservatives. They will fight and march and protest and plead but they will always be slaves, tied up by Satan with the chains of sin in the dungeons of hell. The only real true freedoms are freedom from the power of sin, freedom from the fear of death, freedom from the threat of hell and freedom to live for God. That's freedom. **That's Jesus' freedom.**

Truth and freedom—Jesus' truth and Jesus' freedom—is what drove Luther to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517. Truth and freedom—Jesus' truth and Jesus' freedom—is what drives us to church in Mequon in 2022. Truth and freedom—Jesus' truth and Jesus' freedom—is what compels to share his truth and his freedom with people close by and far away. Why? **Because the truth sets us free and sets them free, too.** Amen.