

*"The Freeing Truth"*

Reformation Day  
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October 31, 2004  
Trinity Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-24; Psalm 46;  
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father, and Our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Well I was expecting," said the Senator with practiced authority, "to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Sorry," replied St. Peter, "He must be obeyed has given me specific instructions. You are to have a trial membership of hell for twenty-four hours and a trial membership in the Kingdom of Heaven of twenty-four hours, after which you are to choose where you wish to stay for eternity."

"Okay," said the Senator rather wearily, "let's get on with it."

So the devil took him into the elevator and took him down, down, down into hell. The doors opened, and the Senator sucked in his breath. There before him was a golf course the likes of which he had never seen before. And on the golf course were all these golf carts, and there were all his friends in black tie outfits. They went off to the clubhouse, and there was the most exquisite banquet you can imagine laid out for them. He was having a wonderful time, when St. Peter came in, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Time's up. We've got to try the other place now."

So St. Peter took him back to the elevator, and they went up, up, up to the Kingdom of Heaven. The doors opened, and again the Senator sucked in his breath. He had never felt so much peace and harmony in all his life. He stepped out, and there was absolute bliss – no media, no people to fight with, no campaigns – it was absolutely peaceful. And there were these wonderful people, with no criticisms whatsoever, with smiles on their faces, entirely happy, stepping from soft cloud to soft cloud, some playing harps and some singing. In no time at all, St. Peter was again tapping him on the shoulder and saying, "Time's up. You've got to make a choice."

Now, being a wonderful diplomat from inside the beltway, the Senator wanted to put St. Peter at ease with the choice he had made. He told St. Peter, "You know, I don't mean anything personal about you or about anything else, but having sampled the two, the Kingdom of Heaven is wonderful and peaceful and I've never known a calm like it. But then there was Hell, with all of my friends, and the golf course, and it was just wonderful, and although I don't mean anything by it, I think I'll choose hell."

"Okay" said St. Peter. He put him on the elevator and down, down, down he went to hell. The elevator doors opened, and the Senator again sucked in his breath. Before him was a wilderness, a gray, bleak wilderness with a huge pile of garbage. And there were all his friends in raggedy clothes, running around filling black garbage bags, trying to diminish the pile, and there was the devil, cracking a whip. The Senator was speechless. When he got his breath and his senses, he went over to the devil and said, "I don't understand. Yesterday I was here and everything was wonderful; today it's absolutely abysmal."

The devil looked at him and said, "Yesterday, we were campaigning. Today, you voted."

We might well ask questions like that. We might well ask what's happening with the current campaign and how it's being waged, with all its personal bitterness and attacks, an emotional and manipulative campaign in which both sides indulge. We've had to stomach a volley of dueling truths whose purpose is to maim and demean, and serves as an astonishing proof of the breaking of the Eighth Commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" which Luther tells us means we're to put the best

interpretation of the behavior of a neighbor. But then, we shouldn't be surprised, because truthfulness these days, in our world, is an elusive reality indeed.

Just take the pop singer Ashlee Simpson, who has recently been invited to Cumberland Valley High School. A week or so ago, she was on NBC's Saturday Night Live, and she sang her first song perfectly. It was wonderful, and everybody thought it was a smash hit. She began her second song, when the sound was a different tune and different words, and it turns out that she was lip-syncing. When the media were asked what was wrong, they responded, "Well, it was a live show, it wasn't a 'live, live' show."

WGAL in this week's newspaper has announced that it will be broadcasting a show for students and why they don't like their looks. My answer is, they don't like their looks (like many of us) because the looks that we have are not what the media portrays as the attractive looks that anyone who's anybody ought to have. It seems to me, America, it's time to wake up to what's being sold to us as the "truth".

As Lutherans, on this day in particular, Reformation Sunday, we should be particularly sensitive to the truth. It was the truth that Martin Luther brought to us five hundred years ago, not with the intent to split the church, but to have the church reexamine its teachings, its belief, and its dogma. Of particular importance to Martin Luther was the reading of Paul's letter to the Romans. More specifically, the last verse, as we heard it read to us this morning, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law". You'll notice it doesn't say "without works" prescribed by the law, but it points out to us that justification comes first, and that works of the law are a response to the grace of God.

Five hundred and some years later, finally, our Roman Catholic brethren agree with it. But it's been five hundred painful years to move from dogmatic rejection to faithful acceptance of the truth that Luther discovered in Paul's letter.

The struggle over what constitutes the truth, and where it can be found, and the consequences it has for faithful living is an ancient one. But our understanding of the truth is not only essential in terms of our membership in the body of Christ, it's essential if we're to live in a world that hasn't a clue what the truth is.

The question Pilate asks of Jesus later, in the Gospel, is surely our question when faced with a deliberately negative and misleading campaign. The Ashlee Simpsons, whose talent has been invited to our high school as a model, and the genuine and soul-wrenching struggles of our teenagers as they try to discover and accept who they are and their worth – is not so much found in their outward appearance, but in the fact that God gave His only Son to die for each one of them. That is the sum total of their worth. Pilate's question, of course, to us sounds simple – What is the truth? And the answer will elude all who have not heard and understood what's being offered to us and to the world in today's lessons.

Spelling out exactly what the truth is, is a major theme in the Gospel according to St. John. His explication of the truth begins in the opening verses of the Gospel: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth". And it concludes with Pilate asking Jesus, "So you are a king?" to which Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." It's then that Pilate, failing to understand what Jesus has just said, asks Him, "What is truth?"

Pilate isn't a lone. Those who follow Jesus, at least in this morning's Gospel lesson, are as perplexed as Pilate, especially since Jesus equates knowing the truth with being free. And I suggest that we ourselves, may not be any the wiser than those people in the gospel. Though I hope, with some hubris probably, that by the end of this sermon we might have a much better understanding as to the truth and how it is that knowing the truth sets us free.

Here in the Gospel lesson before us, there's a double promise: a promise that we can have knowledge of the truth, and a promise that having knowledge of the truth will actually set us really free. It's not a rational knowledge that's being promised, not an intellectual knowledge, but a knowledge that grows out of reception, out of obedient submission to the revelation that God has given of himself in and through Jesus Christ. It means living, as Thomas A'Kempis put it, in the imitation of Christ. We're called to trust that revelation and not to blindly accept dogma.

Do you remember how John opened the Gospel? "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth . . ." Faith always remains bound to the Word, in and through which we're set free in our baptism. That's the truth that sets us free from bondage. Bondage to what, you may ask? Well, bondage to sin, to death, to decay, and bondage to the law. The believers to whom Jesus speaks are at a loss. They cannot understand what Jesus is saying to them, because they believe that being descendants of Abraham guarantees them a freedom they have already. They are the supreme example of a people who found in traditional faith and practice, a refuge and a protection. But here's the supreme tragedy: this very security is their undoing. For it leaves them to reject with furious anger, the suggestion that they're not free and that if they are to be free, it is Jesus who will give them that freedom as a gift. But because of their ancestry, because they're bound to the past, frozen in dogma, they believe they're free already when in actual fact, they're in bondage. The freedom of which they're proud is their possession and they will defend it even to the extent of bloodshed. Not only their own, but the bloodshed of the One who offers himself as the gift from above.

And in fact, they're bent on destroying Jesus (as the sequel to the Gospel will show). Therein lies the proof that they're not free – they are under, instead, the power of sin. And therein lies a warning for us: the one who is not able to receive the gift of freedom given to us from God through Christ out of pure grace, is not yet free. The Jews view their freedom simply in virtue of their past and their descent from Abraham. Except, if they only understood, their history had the meaning of releasing them from their past and directing them into a God-given future; to give them a future and a new life.

God forbid that we should fall into such a trap. For we are not only a reformed church, we are a reforming church. And that's what we celebrate today. Yes, we look back on our past and we're thankful for it, but we're not bound to it. For having understood our past, we move boldly forward into a new future, given to us by God through Christ.

It was Luther who gave us two great gifts in the Reformation: the Bible in the vernacular, in our own language, so that we might all have access to the written Word; and brought to life the great truth embodied in our lesson from Romans, that we are justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Faith in what, you may well ask? To which Paul replies:

*"But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."*

So it is that we all have been set free. Free to follow Christ. Free to make our own decisions. Free to sin boldly.

We've been offered the Word in flesh. We've been offered the Word in scripture. Studying those, reflecting upon those, we are then equipped to act. Knowing full well of our own broken nature, that we may well sin, nonetheless being faithful to Christ, we go ahead and sin boldly.

Therefore, let us head to the polls on Tuesday, despite all the negative advertising, and vote our conscience. Having studied our scriptures, having prayed, and voting true to who we are and what we see as the best for the country's future. And let us live faithfully, following Christ, abiding in His word, trusting Him as our savior, unlike the Senator with whom this sermon began.

Then we can remember with thanksgiving the reformation, not to glorify the past but to understand that in Christ, we have been given the gift of an open and new and living future.

Amen.