

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

There was a renowned and famous United States Senator who died suddenly in church. He was attending a worship service where Mrs. Enney gave a scary Children's Sermon. Mrs. Potato Head leaping out behind a fortress was just too much for him and he expired. He arrived in heaven and stood before St. Peter, and said to him, "I was expecting when I got here that I would be ushered on a red carpet into heaven. St. Peter said to him, "Well, I am sorry Senator, but God has been watching CNN and decided that every thing in heaven has to be fair and balanced. So from now on everyone coming in has to have 24 hours in hell and 24 hours in heaven, and then you get to elect which one you would like. So we are going to start off in hell and the elevator took St. Peter and the Senator down into the pits of Hell. The door opened and the Senator was absolutely thunderstruck. There stretching out before him was the most astounding golf course he had ever seen. He couldn't remember anything like it in real life and there were all his deceased friends riding around in their golf carts having a wonderful time. He went and played with them and finally got to the 18<sup>th</sup> hole. The food was outstanding and he had never seen a clubhouse like it. He was just really getting into it. He was singing and moving and decided that it was so great when St. Peter popped up and said, "O.K., 24 hours are up. It is time to go to heaven."

They get on the elevator and arrive in heaven, the doors open, and again he can't believe how wonderful it is. It is absolutely quiet and calming. Only a Senator from Washington would understand the difference between Washington and quiet and calming. There were no reporters. There were no sudden things to be answered, no questions, no inquiries. He went in there and people were singing and moving quietly and slowly to the music. For the first time in his life he was beginning to feel real rest and relaxation. He was just getting into it when St. Peter came in and said, "That's it. Twenty-four hours are up. Time for you to make a choice." The Senator said, "Well both places are outstanding, but so many of my friends, were in hell and I enjoy golf so much, I don't want to be offensive to you or God, but I think we should go to hell. They got in the elevator and down the elevator they went. It took them to the lowest level of hell. The doors opened and the Senator was thunderstruck. In front of him was this dreadfully grey, bleak landscape with piles of garbage and people in chains, sulfurous smoke and the devil laughing and junior devils lashing people. It was just terrific. The Senator said to the devil, "What's happened, what's happened?" The devil said, "Well Senator, yesterday we were campaigning, today you voted."

So, why do we laugh? I suspect we laugh because the story strikes at the reality of what it is to live in America today. We live under a constant barrage of fiction, fabrications, and fantasies. It is common knowledge, isn't it that Presidential campaign promises are really not to be kept. But it's nice and comforting to think they might be, before the election. Then there is what is called the small print. It is the stuff that hardly anyone reads, but it comes to you on forms, credit cards, warranties and guaranties that come with almost anything you purchase, and the fine details of your insurance policies. How many times do people find their expectations dashed, and their claims denied because they failed to read the detail of the small print, or even understand it?

Remember the old Roman saying, caveat emptor or buyer beware. We shouldn't be surprised. In our day and age, and in our society, truthfulness is an elusive reality. Just look at the phony press conference held by FEMA officials in Washington, D.C. this past week. There it was, a high-ranking official from FEMA answering a number of questions about the response to the fires in Southern California. Trouble was, the whole thing was staged. All the reporters were not reporters at all. They were FEMA staffers. These things happen only because there has been a long, growing shift toward these types of public deception.

It's like Barbara, who just recently was in New Zealand. She got to the Los Angeles airport two weeks ago waiting to board a Qantas flight. I use the name so you won't buy tickets from them and can avoid the trouble. She and her fellow passengers watch through the windows of the departure lounge as their jumbo jet was towed to the gate only to collide with another aircraft. As the passengers watched the growing sea of red lights gather around the damaged plane, the airline announced over the P.A. that the plane had a minor mechanical problem and was being returned to the hanger!

It seems to me it is time for us to wake up to what is being sold to us as the "truth." This is particularly important when it comes to talking about the truth of the faith. As Lutherans, on this particular Reformation Sunday, we should be ultra-sensitive to truthfulness. It was not Martin Luther's intent to split the church. Rather, he called for a reexamination of its teaching and unshakeable beliefs. On particular importance to Luther was his reading of Paul's letter to the Romans. Specifically, the last verse in the second lesson, as we heard it read this morning (Romans 8:28). For we hold that a person is justified by faith, apart from works prescribed by the law.

Then, when we remember James, "faith without works is dead," we realize that good works don't earn God's love and grace. It is entirely the other way around. God's love of us, and His grace freely given to us, calls for good works as our thankful response. Five hundred and some years later, our Roman Catholic brethren have finally gotten around to agree! But it has been a painful 500 years to move from dogmatic rejection to faithful acceptance of the truth which Martin Luther read in Paul's letter over 500 years ago. Our understanding of the truth is not only essential in terms of our membership in the body of Christ, it is essential if we are to live in a world which hasn't a clue what the truth is anymore.

The question Pilate asks, is surely our question, when we are faced with misleading campaign promises, with the deceptive news conferences, and airlines who just can't bring themselves to tell the truth. Pilate's question sounds simple. "What is the truth?" And the answer will prove illusive to all who have not heard and understood what is offered to us in today's scripture lessons.

Spelling out exactly what is the truth is a major theme in the Gospel according to St. John, as we heard it read this morning. Here me quote, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Now remember this gospel starts out telling us that Jesus was the Word. Do you remember the words? "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.” Not only have we heard the word through Christ, we have seen it lived in Jesus. The gospel concludes with Pilate saying to Jesus, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this reason 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 is then that Pilate, failing to understand what has just been said, asks Jesus, “What is the truth?” Pilate isn’t alone. I suspect that we ourselves may not be any wiser at the moment. I hope, by the end of this sermon we will 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 is a double promise: the promise of knowledge of the truth and the promise of freedom. It is not rational knowledge that is promised, not the sort of thing that you can read in a book, it is not intellectual knowledge. It is the reception of a truth that grows out of obedient submission to the revelation God has given of Himself in and through Jesus Christ. Remember how John opens this gospel, “In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us!” Consequently faith always remains bound to the Word in and through which we are set free at our baptism. The same baptism and faith which our new members are going to affirm this morning. So the truth of that word sets us free from bondage. Bondage to what you ask. Bondage to sin, death, and decay as it is so readily seen every day in our world. A world which is filled with fantasy, fabrication and falsehood. In that world we are called to live the Word, to follow the Word, to show the world acts of compassion and forgiveness, for the sake of Christ from whom we ourselves received them.

There are all sorts of phony faiths in the world. There are all sorts of phony Christians, but the test of authenticity is simple. Do they live out a life of truth that leads to freedom? Or, have they made the life of faith a life that is burdened and bound by constraints, rules, and demands which have more to do with their own personal values than it does with the freeing truth of the Word. Such a faith life is like that live by those to whom Jesus was speaking in the Gospel. Their truth, their sanctuary, their security lay in their relationship to Abraham. They could not understand what Jesus was saying to them. Why? Because they were children of Abraham and that was all that mattered to them. They are the supreme example of people who take the name of Jesus Christ to be their possession, just as the children of Abraham had made his name their possession.

Here is the supreme tragedy, this possessiveness; this certainty was their undoing, for it led them to reject the offer of freedom given to them as a gift in and through Jesus. Because of their ancestry, because of their continuing to be bound to the past, because of their being frozen in dogma, they believed they were free and everyone else was in bondage, when they themselves were actually in bondage. In the end, that bondage led them to shed blood. Not only their own, but the blood of the one who offered freedom as a gift from above. God forbid that we should fall into such a terrible trap. For we are not a Reformed Church with a past, we are a Reforming Church with the courage to move into a new future and today we celebrate that reality.

So it is that we have been set free. Free to follow Christ, free to make our own decisions, free to sin boldly. Free to reach out to others truthfully, with caring and compassion, and most of all forgiveness. Let us then live faithfully following Christ, abiding in His word, trusting in Him and

not ourselves, as our savior. And, remembering with thanksgiving the Reformation. Not to glorify the past, but to live into a free and God given future.

Amen.