

Reformation Sunday – October 27, 2024

Text: John 8:31-36

Theme: Truth, Freedom and Jesus' Way

Today is Reformation Sunday, hence the red paraments and the red stoles, the color of the Holy Spirit, to remind us of the work of the Holy Spirit as he forms and reforms his Church from day to day. Reformation Day is both a celebration of a singular event and a celebration of the Spirit's ongoing work. As you remember, Martin Luther is credited with nailing his 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenburg on this day in 1517. This was the beginning of Luther's particular effort to change some abuses in the Church.

However, today, we do not just celebrate an historic event. Rather, we celebrate the principles for which Luther fought and for which we still fight today. Reformation Day is really nothing more than a day on which we celebrate the way the Holy Spirit empowers all of us to combat the forces of darkness that constantly seek to harm the Church.

In 1517, Luther could no longer sit idly by and watch God's people be harmed by a church that had been corrupted so badly that the truth of God's Word was muddied. Of course, it wasn't as though Satan had forced the church to muddy the truth. The church had done that of its own free will. Why? Because it benefited the church. The church wanted to build St. Peter and Paul Basilica. She

needed to fund holy wars. She needed to keep the emperor happy. There were many expenses and if one had to twist a few certain Scriptural truths in order to get a few more dollars out of the people, well then, the end justifies the means.

Are we not just as tempted today? We don't have to make up rules to bind hearts today like in Luther's day. Today, even the few rules God gave us are too many. People rebel against the simplest of them. So, we have to be careful about preaching about the things that might offend people. If you offend anyone, they might leave and if they leave, well, and this is the worst part, they will take their offering with them. So, we end up with churches that preach mush and sap to make people feel good regardless of their sin.

In Luther's day the church had sold herself into bondage. She had become a handmaiden to the Pope. Instead of the Pope living only to serve the Church, the church now served him and he had become her master. And today? Well, we are not so concerned about Pope Francis, but the church still has her masters to which she gladly sells herself. Today she bows to every cultural whim to keep people in the pews. Throw out the holy liturgy because people don't understand it. Welcome anyone to Holy Communion even if they don't know what it is because we wouldn't want anyone to feel excluded – even if they should be excluded for their good.

The Holy Spirit raised up Martin Luther in his time to call the Church to task. Luther was no St. George the Dragon Slayer. He did not have a mighty steed. He did not have a gleaming shield or broad sword. He was only a lowly priest with nothing but the Word of God. Of course, you and I know that the Word of God is more powerful than legions of soldiers with swords and shields. To the dismay of the mighty Pope in Rome, this lowly priest armed with God's word, was causing his empire to crumble.

The empire crumbled on two basic principles – truth and freedom. Luther simply called attention to the Word of God which proclaims truth and thereby frees us. Once people hear the truth, we are free to live our lives more fully than we could imagine. Simply by telling the people this, Luther set the power of God in motion, and the Holy Spirit took over from there.

Truth and freedom are the watchwords of all reformation within the Church. And that is not surprising for those are the words Jesus himself used to describe life with him. If you remain in Jesus' Word, then you will know the truth. The truth is black and white. Either something is true, or it is not. Truth is never gray. Our perception of the truth may be gray, but the truth is black and white. For instance, in the case of dealing with two evil choices, we might say to choose the lesser of two evils. Or we might say we have no

righteous choice. That is not always exactly true. Often, there is a righteous choice. It's just that we may not clearly see it. Or, sometimes, because of our own sin, we may choose not to see it. We come up with excuses for why someone has to sin, but the truth doesn't change with circumstances and neither does God. We don't always like the truth because it accuses us. The truth makes sinners of us all – poor miserable sinners.

But Jesus promises us that as hard as the truth can be, it is powerful, and it will change our lives. It is not as though he speaks the truth and then walks away. He gives us power to embrace the truth. He drowns our sinful nature with the waters of Baptism. He strengthens our weak frames with his own body and blood. Suddenly we find ourselves embracing the truth and wondering how we ever did anything else because when we embrace the truth, we are set free, and there is nothing like being free.

True freedom is not the same as the freedom we might seek. We call certain things freedom but they're not true freedom. In essence, what we call freedom is sometimes only a new master to which we have sold ourselves. We can be like the proverbial 18-year-old who wants to be treated like an adult but still lives in his parent's home, eats his parent's food, and uses his parent's gasoline. He doesn't really want freedom. He just wants the

benefits of freedom. So, he decides to move in with a bunch of friends so he can be free. Then he discovers the joy of rent, utilities, insurance, groceries, and the taskmasters he once thought his parents to be seem benevolent by comparison.

We might even move around and try different masters. We look for the best deal. But, being subject to any master is slavery, regardless of the perks it seems to offer. True freedom only comes through following Christ. Only Jesus makes us truly free.

That is why, for Paul, suddenly everything is permissible. He is free. There is no human law that binds him anymore than any human law binds us. We are free. Our eternal life is guaranteed whether we keep rules or break rules. Make a rule if you want. What are you going to do about it if I break it? You can't control me. I'm free. The word "cannot" does not exist for me and, sometimes, that upsets people, especially people who are enslaved. If one is enslaved, it is natural to be angry with those who are free.

But you don't have to be enslaved unless you want to be. Jesus has told us the truth, and that truth has set us free. So, if one is enslaved, he is enslaving himself. Everyone is welcome to follow Jesus anytime he likes. We are welcomed to a place where we can do anything we want, and our Baptismal waters make us clean, so

we have no desire to do that which is evil. His body and blood fill us up, so we no longer hunger for the garbage of this world, which once may have been our primary diet.

Perhaps we are not quite there yet. I still have urges to do evil. Sometimes, I still find myself strangely attracted to eating the rotting, sinful, garbage of this world. These are the times I need reformation. The Holy Spirit is with me though - even as he is with you - even as he was with Luther. He works on us with the truth of His Word. He reforms us day in and day out until the day comes when we pass from this sin fallen world into a new earth where we will continue living freely and truthfully with no temptation to ever sell ourselves to that lying devil again. Until that day, you and I are always growing in Christ.