

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

“And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” from the gospel text that has been used for some time in Lutheran churches around the world on the day we celebrate as Reformation Day. It’s a good summary of the truth confessed by the Reformers. It’s also a text that’s occasionally been misused over the years as some Lutherans have tried to explain what the “truth” is that sets us free. Some here may remember years past when the idea of “truth” was cast in such a way that it set Lutherans in particular, Protestants in general, against the Roman Catholic Church.

So Lutherans would rail against the Pope, or rail against the Catholic teachings on Mary, when in fact Luther actually wanted to remain Catholic, he certainly never wanted a denomination named after himself. Luther also had reverence for Mary and the teachings he might have had a problem with didn’t come about until quite some time later. Some Lutherans have had a problem with making the sign of the cross because only Catholics do that, when again this is something Luther himself recommended. Nor did Luther believe that there was the only way to articulate what it means that Christ is present in the bread and wine. What was more important to him was believing that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine.

Now in our Gospel this morning, we have three aspects I want to bring to your attention, the content, the means and the result.

The content is truth, not simply truth in the sense that Pontius Pilate meant when he asked Jesus “What is truth?” Instead truth in the sense Jesus meant when he tells us “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” In other words, truth is more than simply a body of truth, it is a body, the person of Christ himself.

Think of the means as the words about that Truth and what he has done for our salvation, words written and spoken.

The result is freedom, not so much political freedom, but spiritual freedom, freedom from slavery to sin, from bondage to sin. It is freedom that is ours to enjoy as we are children of God and have a place in the household.

Now we must acknowledge that we are in bondage, that is, captive to sin. That’s a phrase we use in our confession although maybe not often enough, as it seems we sometimes have trouble remembering it. But it is in the gospel text itself. Jesus says “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” So the word truth presupposes that we are in bondage. And that’s how the Jewish leaders hear it: “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone!” They don’t believe they need to be made free because they do not think they have ever been in bondage.

But to Luther, the Apostle Paul, and for that matter in scripture as a whole, we are in bondage to sin, stuck in sin, trapped by sin, mired and wallowing in sin. You can

express it in different ways, but it's all the same thing, the same plea the psalmist David made in Psalm 51 "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." In other words, we're sinners from the get go. Oh we like to think that people, including us, are pretty good, if it's not true of others, well, it's certainly true of us. It's comforting, but it's not the truth because as the Apostle Paul tells us in our reading from Romans, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Paul tells us all have sinned, no exceptions.

So you and I, pretty good though we might be, confronted with our sin, are called to repent and it's a constant, a daily part of our lives. Repentance rooted in the heart, acknowledging our sin, daily recognizing our need, recognizing that our acceptance in God's sight comes only, totally, entirely by his grace. We don't earn it, we can't earn it. We don't deserve it, we will never deserve it based on our own merits. We can try to obey the commandments or say the right prayers, but we simply can't do it on our own. Period. But to finish what Paul wrote in our second lesson, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; so they are now justified by his grace as a gift."

There have been times when I have been visiting someone who doesn't have much time left and they say something like "I just hope I've been good enough." But we can never be good enough. We are saved through faith, we are saved because of what Christ has done on our behalf, Christ crucified. We are saved because Christ welcomes those who trust in this grace by faith. You and I have been set free by Christ. "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed!" The truth that sets us free, a life of faith in Christ's wonderful grace.

AMEN