

John 8:31-36; Reformation B; 10/28/18 Pastor Ellen Schoepf

As we approach yet another election day, issues of truth-telling and freedom are in the forefront of our minds. So, I find it interesting that, on this day, **Jesus** is speaking to us about **truth** and **freedom**. However, Jesus' words to us regarding truth and freedom could **not** be more **different** from the way these concepts are discussed in the news and in present culture.

Today's passage from John takes place within the context of a dialogue between Jesus and his opponents. Jesus' opponents are trapped in their sin, trapped in a dead-end life, and they do not believe in him. They do not believe he is the new revelation of God, the truth. The focus of the dialogue is all about Jesus' identity, it is all about who **Jesus** is. It is a dialogue of faith that centers around two words – **truth** and **freedom**. Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the **truth**, and the **truth** will make you **free**." The truth **Jesus** is talking about is himself. This truth is **not** just some concept; it is **not** an abstract idea and it is **not** the opposite of falsehood. This truth is a real, living person – the person of Jesus, himself, the person who reveals to us the truth of what God is like, the truth that God is a God of **love**. And, to connect

to Jesus and live in his truth is to be **set free**, set free from **unfaith**, from a life of living without faith.

Today, we are celebrating the Reformation, a change that took place within the church when Martin Luther discovered something about the **truth** of Jesus 500 plus years ago. Throughout his struggles and throughout his life, Martin Luther participated in a dialogue of faith. Luther was a man who knew intense inner struggle. Luther was tormented because of his own sinfulness. He was a man who knew the depths of depression. Then, one day as he was studying the passage we heard today in our second reading from Romans, he made a discovery that transformed not only **his** life, but also the life of the church and, ultimately, **our** understanding of the gospel. Luther heard the following words as if for the first time and they transformed his entire being. Listen again to these words. ““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!**” **Did you hear those words? Justified by his grace AS GIFT!** And, **who** receives that gift? The writer of Romans says, “There is **NO** distinction – **ALL** have sinned, and **ALL ARE JUSTIFIED BY HIS GRACE AS GIFT!**” The Gospel is quite clear. **ALL** receive the gift!

When Martin Luther read those words and truly heard what they were saying, he was so transformed that his new understanding brought change to the world.

It was when Luther made this great discovery about justification by God's **grace as gift** that he finally began to understand the **truth** of Jesus' identity. He understood that Jesus **is** the truth, and Jesus reveals to **us** the truth about God, the truth that God is love. Luther knew his own captivity to sin, and he was very aware of the church's captivity to sin. Luther also knew he was not able to free himself from bondage to sin. His **freedom** could only come through Christ.

Becoming truly free is never easy. Luther found out that grace and truth are not cheap. Knowing the truth of Jesus and living **in** that truth always means facing the cross. And, the cross **always** means death, death to self, death to systems, death to ideologies, and even death to religious practices when they are not faithful to the Word.

When **we** face the truth, **we** ultimately must look at **ourselves**. We cannot become free from the chains that bind **us** unless we can honestly face **all** that holds us in bondage and unless we **die** to self. There are all sorts of ways we live in bondage. Not one of us is totally free. We live in bondage to addictions, to competition, to work,

to consumerism, to ideologies, to fear, to anxiety, to narcissistic behavior, to any number of things in life. And, quite often the things that hold us captive become a way of running from the pain of life.

Friends, the One **truth** that will set us free from the chains that bind, including the fear of the living of these days and the fear of dying, has eluded most people. The absolute truth, which liberated Luther, and which liberates all who believe it, is the truth of Jesus as he tells us God loves us and bathes us in grace and mercy and accepts us **as we are**. We do not have to become something else before God loves us!

Now, I have to say that this ultimate and awesome reality doesn't keep us from the fires and trials of our life journey; but, it strengthens and carries us safely through and beyond them. That is what Luther experienced and that is what we experience. **The good news** for you and for me is that we stand in the presence of God and we are embraced by the gracious loving arms of Jesus and, when we truly understand this, we become able to **face** the cross. And, when we continue **in** the Word and become faithful disciples, only **then** are we able to live into the **freedom** of the Son.

Now, the church has not always communicated this good news to the best of our ability. In his book, *Between Noon and Three*, Episcopal priest, Robert Capon, talks about this freedom we have been given and he discusses the way the church has responded to this freedom when he writes:

If we are ever to enter fully into the glorious liberty of the [children] of God, we are going to have to spend more time thinking about freedom than we do. The church, by and large, has had a poor record of encouraging freedom. She has spent so much time inculcating in us the fear of making mistakes that she has made us like ill-taught piano students; we play our songs, but we never really hear them, because our main concern is not to make music, but to avoid some flub that will get us in dutch. She has been so afraid we will lose sight of the laws of our nature, that she made us care more about how we look than about **who we are**; made us act more like the subjects of a police state than fellow citizens of the saints. [p. 148]

Friends, we have been made free! So, the questions before us really are this: “Now, what do we do with that freedom? How have we been changed and how will we now live life since we are truly free?”

On this Reformation Sunday, the good news that is before us is a word that is all about a **truth** and **freedom** that are of **ultimate** concern, a truth and freedom that **will** change your life. Jesus is saying to each of us, “[Come, let go of your issues and get to know

me. Live in my love and live in my Word.] If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you....[because] if the Son sets you free, you are free through and through.” (The Message)

You are free, my friends. Knowing that, what do you plan to do?