

It often seems as though we are presently living in a post-truth culture. Michiko Kakutani is a writer and former chief book critic for The New York Times. In 2018, she wrote an excellent article titled *“The death of truth: how we gave up on facts.”* In that article, Kakutani eloquently describes the disease of “truth decay” and the way it is permeating and dismantling our culture and our society. Commenting on our present perilous relationship to truth and facts, she writes:

The term “truth decay” has joined the post-truth lexicon that includes such now familiar phrases as “fake news” and “alternative facts”. And it’s not just fake news either: it’s also fake science (manufactured by climate change deniers and anti-vaxxers, who oppose vaccination), fake history (promoted by Holocaust revisionists and white supremacists), fake Americans on Facebook (created by Russian trolls), and fake followers and “likes” on social media (generated by bots).

Her article is quite helpful as she articulates the way “truth decay” is infecting our perception of truth, our understanding of freedom, and the way this disease characterizes the deep brokenness in our culture. And, while Kakutani wrote this article in 2018, her words are even more poignant today as we think about what has happened over the past three years. Truth decay just continues to grow wider and deeper. Quite honestly, we may even

ask the question, “What is truth, what is really true?” So, it is fitting that today, we are reminded of **Jesus’** perspective on the meaning of **truth**. **Jesus** is speaking to **us** about **truth** and **freedom**, and Jesus’ words 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 Jesus is the new revelation of God, the one who **is** 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 really like**, the truth that God is a **God of love**. And, to connect to Jesus and live in his truth that

God is love and holds each one of us in love, is to be set free from **unfaith**. Knowing God loves us truly sets us free in so many ways.

Today, we are celebrating the Reformation, a change that took place within the church when Martin Luther discovered something about the **truth** of Jesus 504 years ago. Luther was a man who knew intense inner struggle. Luther was tormented because of his own sinfulness, and he knew the depths of depression. Then, one day as he was studying the passage we heard today in our 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, they changed his life, and his new understanding and insight brought transformation and change to the church.

It was when Luther made this great discovery about justification by God's grace as **gift, all 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**. 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. He was set free when he finally came to understand God's grace is so encompassing that this **God of love** accepted him **as he was**.

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 systems of oppression, death to ideologies, and even death to religious practices and understandings when they are not faithful to God's living 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 of **all** kinds, to competition, to work, to consumerism, to ideologies, to political perspectives, to fear, to anxiety, to our desire to control, and to so much more. And, quite often the things that hold us captive become a way of running **from** our fears and running **from** the pain of life.

Friends, the one truth that will set us free from all our fears of living and of dying has eluded most people. The absolute truth that liberated Luther and liberates all who believe it is the truth of Jesus as he tells us **God deeply loves us and bathes us in grace and mercy. God loves and accepts us as we are!** Now, quite frankly, this ultimate and awesome reality doesn't keep us from the fires and trials of our life journey; rather, it strengthens and carries us safely through them and beyond them. That is what Luther experienced and that is what we experience. The good news for you and for me is that when we finally come to realize that we stand in the presence of God and are embraced by the gracious loving arms of Jesus, 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.

The Reformation that began with Martin Luther is ongoing. As Lutherans, we are a reforming church. We are continually being made new. God continually calls each of us to change and become new beings. God continually calls the church to participate in a dialogue of faith and engage in the process of being re-formed as we live into the in-breaking reign of God. And, I am really looking forward to see where that dialogue takes us as we move beyond Covid-19, because the church is becoming changed and WILL again be re-formed and transformed.

So, hear **this truth and live in this truth**. It is the truth that really matters. 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)