

Reformation Weekend: "Good News: The Truth Will Make You Free! But 1<sup>st</sup> It Will Make You Miserable!"  
John 8:31-36  
October 27-28, 2018  
Holy Trinity Lutheran, Manasquan, NJ

The word we'll keep coming back to this Reformation Weekend is **truth**.

"A lie can travel halfway around the world by the time the **truth** gets on its boots."

*Jesus said to [Thomas], "I am the way, and the **truth**, and the life." (John 14:6)*

*Jesus answered [Pilate], "...For this 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." Pilate asked him, "What is **truth**?" (John 18:37b-38)*

Truth is important. I once met a woman named *Aletheia*, the Greek word for truth, and I know two people who chose to have that word tattooed on themselves. But where do we find truth in a world in which many people lie, both in the public and the private sphere? What's **fake** news and what's **real** news? How does the **Good** News factor in?

*Jesus said... "If you continue in my word, you are **truly** my disciples; and you will know the **truth**, and the **truth** will make you free... [I]f the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:31, 36)*

Sometimes we seek the truth and sometimes we skirt it. At times we close our eyes to the obvious truth right in front of us because it's too painful to admit or because we intuit we won't have the will or energy or courage to address what's wrong. In other words: **there are truths that hurt**. There's a poster of a rag doll being drawn through an old-fashioned laundry wringer; the caption is, "The truth will make you free, but first it will make you miserable." For instance, on a personal level:

- "I love this person – but the truth is that our relationship is not life-giving. " Or --
- "I always thought I'd love this as a career. But now that I'm doing it, I don't enjoy it at all. I was mistaken."

Or on a church level:

- Every year we confirm a bunch of kids who promise to remain actively engaged in faith and to be present in this community. Every year the majority of them disappear, for years on end. The truth is we're trying hard to weave them into the fabric of this faith family, but we're not succeeding as we'd like, at least in the short term. (Let me add to those of you who are the exception to this sad

- trend: you give me hope! And help to keep our Confirmation Connection team going! And are the best possible example to our current confirmands!)
- Another truth that hurts: whenever we list our ministry priorities as a congregation, children and youth are near the top of the list. But we have so few Sunday School teachers and so few consistent students that 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grades are now one class.
- Certainly worship is our top priority. But each week is a race to the finish to fill the ushering and Communion assistant slots. It's a painful truth that our volunteers in **all** areas of Life Together are struggling because there's too much for too few people to do.
- Or how 'bout this: we're way behind in projected giving. If we don't **catch** up in the current year and if financial prospects for 2019 don't **pick up**, we may be unable to fill the vacant position of Coordinator of Youth & Family Ministry. That will further stress our Christian Education volunteers and further impact our ability to foster faith in our young ones and their families.

No way around it, these church **trends** are undeniable **truths, for the larger Church and not just our congregation**. But we don't despair, because God isn't finished with us yet! And because ultimately this ministry isn't ours, it's God's. And because what God **intends** to happen, God **enables** to happen, especially when the people of God aren't afraid to face harsh facts and we're willing to work to counter them, by God's grace.

On the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation last year, our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton reminded us that as the Church we are **always** faced with the hard truth of our imperfection, **constantly** in need of reform-from-the-inside-out, we're **often** swimming against the cultural stream, and we're **forever** blessed with the presence and power of God's Spirit to transform us more and more into the image of Christ. Bishop Eaton wrote:

We are not called to be the church of the past nor the church of some distant future, but to be the church right now. For whatever reason, we are the ones God is using at this time, in this messiness. We are not going to get it right all of the time. We are broken and sinful creatures, but we are also redeemed creatures. In baptism we already died the only death that really matters. Can we start to live like we believe that?

On Reformation Weekend we remember a monk named Martin Luther who posted 95 theses, points of debate, and unintentionally set in motion a movement that changed the course of Western history. But **most** importantly on Reformation Weekend we celebrate a Savior named Jesus Christ and the **Good News** in John 3:16 that:

*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

That is the bedrock truth, the basic building block of faith, the unshakeable foundation on which we build our lives. It is a truth that requires more than head knowledge, more than intellectual assent, more than the mouthed words, "I believe." It requires the response of a living relationship with the Savior that shapes our relationships with everyone else.

In today's Gospel 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... [I]f the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."*

Continuing in His Word means allowing it to take deep root in our hearts, not just in our heads. The word for *continue* is the same as the word for *abide*. Remember our Lord's words the night before He died?

*"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who **abide** in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."* (John 15:5)

What we are called to do in the two Great Commandments is to love God above all else and to love our neighbor as ourselves. In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That requires both God's grace and our effort. We are to do whatever we can to shape the world according to God's will. If God were the only One who ruled, if everything in creation proceeded as God's heart desires, what would this world look like? It's our job to discern that and to act on it, as individuals and as citizens blessed to live in a democracy, blessed to have a say in how things go down in our country. Which certainly isn't to say that all Christians see things alike. People of faith can and do disagree on many things. But when we dwell in Christ, when we abide in God's grace, when we continue in the Word, when we maintain the unity of the Body of Christ by respecting each of its members, when we honor our common humanity by acknowledging **every** person as created in the image of God, then we have common ground on which we can hope to help build the kingdom of God.

The Law convicts us of our sin and the Gospel comforts us with a Savior. Because we can face the hard truth of our sin, our continual falling short of the glory of God, we can embrace the gift of God in Jesus Christ. Because we are forgiven, we can forgive others. Because we have been welcomed, we can welcome others. Because one of the fruits of the Spirit is humility, we can admit our sin, our

shortcomings, our biases, our arrogance at times, and recognize the need to listen respectfully to those who disagree with us. This is especially important as political rhetoric heats up on both sides of the aisle. Let us remember: **Jesus is Lord**. Offering incense to Caesar is idolatry. A namesake of Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr., had this to say: the church is **neither the master nor the slave** of the state. The church [and therefore each Christian] is called to be the **conscience** of the state.

The following advice is from Thomas Merton in his classic *New Seeds of Contemplation* (p. 177). He uses the term “enemy.” It might be helpful instead to think of those with whom we disagree, perhaps passionately. I think Merton is channeling some of God’s own truth that sets us free:

“Don’t be too quick to assume your enemy is a savage just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of you because he feels that you are afraid of him. And perhaps if he believed you were capable of loving him he would not be your enemy. Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is an enemy of God just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy precisely because he can find nothing in you that gives glory to God. Perhaps he fears you because he can find nothing in you of God’s love and God’s kindness and God’s patience and mercy and understanding of the weaknesses of men [and women].

The hardest truths to see are the ones most apt to transform us, our lives, our world. Amen

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