

The Truth Will Set You Free

John 8:31 ff.

This is a special day for us Lutherans. Every year, on the Sunday closest to October 31st, we celebrate the Reformation.

Why October 31st? Because, according to tradition, on that day, the Eve of All Saints, in 1517, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther, an Augustinian priest and professor of Bible at Wittenberg University, posted 96 Theses, or points of discussion, on the church door at Wittenberg. He did so to invite other scholars and priests to engage in discussion about points of theology and teaching of the Roman Catholic Church we he believed to be in error. By a happy convergence of politics and technology, Luther's 95 Theses were duplicated and given wide distribution in the Holy Roman Empire, where they found willing ears, minds, and hearts in agreement with his points, and the Reformation of the Roman Catholic Church was begun.

In point of fact, in one sense, "Reformation" is really a misnomer. Luther's goal was to correct or reform unbiblical teachings within the Roman Catholic Church of

his time, but that church was not really reformed. Luther was excommunicated by the pope, and those who followed his teachings formed a new church, the Lutheran Church. That was never Luther's intent on October 31st, 1517.

In another sense, though, "Reformation" does describe what flowed from Luther's actions on that Halloween, for the preaching and teaching of the Gospel and, indeed, the Christian Church on earth was reformed.

God, using His servant, this quixotic, difficult, monk, uncovered and brought back into the light of day His Gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus alone, from where it had been covered over and buried under the writings and opinions of theologians.

It was Luther's God-given passion for the truth that lay at the heart of the Reformation. He could not abide that the Church of his time was teaching doctrines that were at odds with the truth of the Bible. It was not any truth that Luther was so passionate about. He carried little about scientific or mathematical truth; he was obsessed with the truth of God's Word, and could not

suffer that it had been corrupted and subordinated to the ramblings of human minds.

So he stood up and he spoke up, even at risk of his position and, ultimately, of his life.

In 1521, he was summoned to defend his writings and teachings before the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. After being told to recant everything he had written, Luther asked for a night to consider and to pray. When he appeared before the Emperor, the princes of the Empire and the representative of the Pope, he made a statement of his defense. He explained that much of what he had written was in complete agreement with accepted Catholic doctrine, so if he were to recant that, he would be recanting what even the pope agreed with. He completed his defense with these words, reconstructed by him after the Diet:

"Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted [convinced] of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted

themselves) by manifest reasoning, I stand convicted [convinced] by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us.

"On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me."

Luther was held captive by the truth of God's Word. It is the same truth about which Jesus speaks in the Gospel lesson for this morning.

It is the truth which sets people free. It is a particular truth, the truth of God's Word, the truth about Jesus, the truth about the only way to eternal life.

It is the truth that is bound up with God's promise made in the Garden that He would send a Champion to rescue mankind, a truth proclaimed by the prophets of the Old Testament, a truth embodied in Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, who called Himself, "...the Way, and

the Truth, and the Life," and who demonstrated the truth of that statement by spending 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ years speaking God's truth, doing miracles which validated His words and His identity, and then giving His life on a cross and being raised from death to secure salvation for all of mankind.

That is the truth that lies at the core of God's holy Word, the truth about which all of Scripture testifies. As John wrote in His Gospel, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may[a] believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31)

It is the truth of the way of salvation, the truth that Jesus, the Son of God, became one of us and lived among us, that He died on a cross and, in doing so, took the full weight of our sin, and the punishment and death we deserved, in His own body and spirit, standing in our place. It is the truth that He was raised from death by the Father three days later. It is the truth that we may be saved by faith in Him as a free gift of God's grace, and in no other way. As Paul wrote in our Second Lesson

today, in Romans 3:28: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."

That is the truth that Luther would not relinquish, or compromise, or water down, even at risk of his earthly life.

Where do we see that commitment to truth today? Of all the things that have been lost since the 1960's, perhaps the greatest is the understanding that there are truths which are eternal and absolute, and not related to the culture or the prevailing thought patterns of a particular time.

The mantra today is "My truth is my truth and your truth is your truth, and one is as good as another."

That is not even intellectually honest. It is the pabulum of political correctness, the torah of tolerance, which is the highest value in our deluded society.

It is a belief that people hold with regard to faith that they do not apply equally in other areas of their lives.

If confronted with someone who says, "I believe that if I jump out of airplane without a parachute, I will land gently and safely on the ground" none of the proponents of the "Your truth/my truth" mantra would invoke it as valid.

If I were to say to one who holds this deluded nonsense, "I am going to take all your money because I believe that I have more right to it than you", they would defend their wallet or purse, not fall back on their ridiculous philosophy.

Yet in the area of our relationship with God we hear philosophies which directly contradict the truth of God's Word and they are held as valid because they are "someone's truth."

"All or many paths lead to God." That's a favorite one, promoted by no less a celebrity than Her Highness, the Queen of Broadcasting, Oprah Winfrey.

"I'm spiritual", the implication being that all one needs to do is identify oneself as such to be alright with God.

"All religions are the same." This is so moronic that it boggles the mind. Even a cursory examination of the teachings of various religions reveals to even the dimmest of minds that this is patently untrue.

But because a celebrity utters these inanities, or a college professor propounds them from her ivory tower, they are held up as jewels of wisdom.

If it weren't so tragic, it would be funny.

But it's not because the eternal life of human beings is at stake.

We celebrate today not a man, but God, who would not allow His truth, His absolute, unchanging truth to be kept in darkness. We celebrate the willingness of Martin Luther to be used by God to bring His Gospel, His truth, into the light of day, where the people for whom Jesus died could hear it and read it and be saved from their sins by it.

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," Jesus said. That is what we celebrate today, and everyday we read the Gospel. For the Gospel, God's

truth, sets us free from sin, death, and the power of the devil. It frees us to live without guilt, in the joy God intended for us. It frees us to live our lives free from fear of eternal punishment for our sins, and to seek to serve God and do His will because we want to, not because we have to.

Never let it be compromised; never let it be covered over. Embrace it, internalize it, believe it, live it, share it. Stand with it against the foolishness of our present age, for this will pass away, but the truth of God will endure forever.