

Reformation Sunday 2021

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

In our reading this morning from John'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*"...

You know, as we remember the Protestant Reformation this morning - on this Reformation Sunday (and we think about the witness of Martin Luther) - I think it's hard for us to appreciate what those words from John's Gospel might have meant to Luther (more than 500 years ago)...

what we do know is that Luther tried to please God - to know God - and to serve God with all of his heart (but in studying Luther's life we also know that he often expressed *having an honest struggle* (in living up to what he believed God expected from him) - and so often, he complained of still being stuck in 'bondage to sin' rather than experiencing the freedom that Jesus promises (in our reading this morning - from John's Gospel)...

Now I have to back up for a moment and tell you that this all started after Martin Luther had a near death experience (which frightened him greatly)... as the story goes, he was struck by lightning, he thought he was going to die, and he promised that if he were to live (that he would dedicate his life to the Lord)...

Have you ever done that before?... have you ever found yourself in trouble (and you promise God that if He gives you a second chance) you'll change?... you'll become a better person... (I think they call those 'foxhole prayers')... well, that was Luther's prayer... and he prayed it because he believed that if he had died - he was certainly going to hell... and throughout his life (this tormented him greatly)...

But keeping to his word, Martin Luther did devote himself to God (as an Augustinian monk) and he spent long hours in prayer, and fasting, and with constant confession (in hopes of cleansing his heart and soul) - he would even go to ridiculous lengths to prove his faithfulness to God (by sleeping outside on the coldest nights of the year until he had to be carried back in - or by whipping

himself when he felt especially guilty or sinful)... always trying his hardest to please God with his good works (in order to save himself from Hell)...

in fact, he's even quoted as saying, "*If anyone could have gained heaven as a monk by their merits, then I would indeed have been among them*"...

And do you know what's funny (about his attempt of being free from sin and trying to please the Lord) through good works?... instead of being drawn closer to God – Martin Luther started to resent and loathe the god (he couldn't please)... and he's quoted as saying, "*In trying to please a god that would only accept perfection from me - I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of Him the jailor and hangman of my poor soul.*"... do you hear Luther's torment in his words?...

And so, the irony for Martin Luther (as one who tried to be faithful through good works and who was trying to be honest to God wholeheartedly) – is that rather than finding the freedom that Jesus speaks of in our Gospel lesson– Luther instead felt shut out, he didn't feel good enough, and ultimately – he felt rejected by God (because he knew that he couldn't measure up)...

Now I wish I could say that was then (and this is now) – but we all know that there are many people even today who are also held captive to the same type of guilt, and shame, and fear... whether it be because of something they've done in the past – or what they were taught as children growing up – and it always surprises me to know that even today some people view God (not as One who forgives and seeks to comfort us – but One who is always ready to blame and punish and zap out unbelievers)...

In fact, I have a good friend who will not go to church (even to this day) because he's convinced that God doesn't love him (and what's worse – he can't forgive himself for his own past mistakes)... and even though that might not sound like a big deal to someone who knows a more gentle, merciful, loving god (like we do) – the sad thing is that for people like my friend death is the most frightening thing he could ever imagine... (because – in his words – he "doesn't have much to hope for"))...

But that's why this day (Reformation Sunday) is so important (and hopeful) for Christians to remember (and to tell the world about)... because Martin Luther was once that man – who, for a while believed that he wasn't good enough for God... that he was a sinner and had no hope of peace in the afterlife... and because of these lies that Martin Luther believed, he also lived with guilt and with fear (that kept him in the bondage of sin)... and in a joyless relationship with our Lord...

But as Jesus says in our Gospel reading this morning from John 8:31, *"If you continue in my word (which Luther did do), you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free"...*

And what truth did Luther discover in God's Word (that not only set him free from guilt and shame, but ignited the Protestant Reformation?)... Well, it's found in Ephesians 2:8 – where it says, *"For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."...*

In other words, salvation is a gift... and death is not something we need to fear, or worry about, and we certainly can't do anything to stop it... this is why even Jesus (when talking about death) tells his disciples in John 14:1, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled – believe in God, believe also in me"...* it's why St. Paul tells us in Romans 3:24 – *"They are now 'made whole again' (or justified) by his grace **as a gift**, through the Redemption that is in Christ Jesus"...* and why we read in John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that **He gave His Only Begotten Son** – that whoever believes in Him shall not perish- but find Eternal Life"...*

And what is the truth that shall set us free?... that God is love...

And if God *is love* – then all things can be forgiven – all of us can live our lives with hope, and joy, and grace – and no one (not any one of us) needs to fear the World to Come... if God is love... and only through God's love (can we be set free)...

And perhaps that's the greatest contribution of Martin Luther and the true reason why this day is so important (because it's on this day that we remind each other – that God loves the world)... the only truth that can set us free from guilt, from shame, and from fear... and all by the Grace of God... it's the only truth that can set us free from the bondage to sin...

4

I want to close by telling you that by the end of Luther's life he had achieved more in his lifetime than the lives of 100 men combined – he wrote volumes of work, and music, and poems, and doctrines... he ministered through a pandemic, a war, translated the Bible into German – and he's even known for setting up the first Christmas tree...

Of course, there's no mention of Luther leading a church through a renovation (but truth be told, Luther was no joke)...

Yet, what made Luther's faith so special (and why those who study his life grow to like him or love him) was that even after all of his contributions and accomplishment (and the respect he received even in his own day) Luther always remained humble... and always believed that all good things come from God (not from ourselves)...

But it was the last words that Luther ever spoke that are not only summarize his teachings (but remind us of God's Grace and God's Love)... he said, "*We are but beggars, this is true*"...

Friend's the truth that shall set us free is that God loves us... on this Reformation Day (find reason to bless God's name for giving us such an unexpected and beautiful gift) but do what Martin Luther did – and tell the world – about the love of God!...

May the words of Jesus Christ free you from guilt... may our Lord's presence be your strength and constant companion... and may the love of God be your peace and salvation...

In Jesus' name we pray...

Amen!