

October 28, 2018
Reformation Sunday
John 8:31-36, Romans 3:19-28, Psalm 46, Revelation 14:6-7

Gospel: John 8:31-36

³¹Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ³³They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” ³⁴Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

As stated prior to preaching this sermon, concerning the mass shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA on October 27, 2018.

It is a bit unnerving, considering the senseless acts of hate and violence in Pittsburgh yesterday, to read the first few words of our gospel text to the congregation. These words are “Jesus said to the Jews....” In my reading since this tragedy, I stumbled upon a comment from a certain theologian, but I can’t recall the name. He said something akin to “Jews and Christians are one another’s greatest problem. A problem is so great, only God will be able to sort it out in the last days.” I think I understand this comment. For Christians and Jews profess faith in the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Like our Jewish cousins, we gather each week to worship God, and we expect to do so in peace. When such despicable acts occur, we turn to our God, who is as the children sang moments ago, God is our refuge and strength. The God of Jacob is our stronghold.” Thank you children, for this message of faith. We are right to remember our Jewish cousins in this time of tragedy and grief.

Sermon for Reformation Sunday

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, Churches all over the land, especially Lutheran Churches, are celebrating Reformation Sunday. It is the day we remember the actions of one man in particular, who changed the course of the Church and therefore the course of history. But Reformation Sunday is not a day in which we are to give history

lessons. It is not a day in which we are to spend our time, gathered for worship around God's Word and Sacraments, all the while talking about the heroic deeds of Martin Luther. We did that last year.

We did that last year as we celebrated the 500th anniversary of his posting 95 articles for debate on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Even then, as momentous as the occasion was, I would say Dr. Luther would have told us we missed the boat on that one. That is because Reformation Sunday, as much as we like to look back upon our heritage, is still something other. It is the Lord's day.

The Lord's Day has but one purpose. The third commandment spells it out plainly. "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." For Christians, that means gather for worship, hear God's Word, and receive His goodness through the sacraments of Holy Baptism and The Lord's Supper. So, this being the case, on this Reformation Sunday, I would ask you one question, especially as it pertains to our gospel text today. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Discipleship is a word that we have heard use much in the Church recently. It seems that most main line denominations are trotting out one discipleship program after another. But what does it mean?

Is the world any better off since the Church has aimed her focus on discipleship? Do we see any appreciable difference in the way the Church makes her presence known within the community at large? I believe the Church, those bodies that are focusing on Discipleship, are on the right track. I believe our own NALC, as much as we have struggled to define what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, is faithfully following the mandate Christ gave to his followers.

In our text, Jesus says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." He said these words to people who had come to believe in him; people who heard his teaching, saw him work wonders, and came to understand that he is the Messiah. They believed, at least from a human point of view. Sometimes, as I read the headlines and watch the evening news, I wonder if our world still suffers from this sort of condition. Are we a society of believers who really don't understand what "believing" means?

Not too long ago, another one of those studies was taken that asked people questions about their religious practices. When asked whether they believed in God, 90% of those polled answered "yes." When asked whether religion in any

way affected their politics and their business, 50% said “no.” Just as it was in Jesus’ day, it seems the same is true today. Simply believing doesn’t seem to be enough. I would say that indeed, it is not.

Jesus said to those who believed in him that those who would abide in his word would know the truth, and the truth would set them free. The people Jesus spoke with believed they were never enslaved to anyone, they were children of Abraham. Perhaps they had forgotten about the 400 years of captivity in Egypt, or the many years of exile in Babylon. They may have even discounted the Roman occupation of their day. Their belief was clouded with pride and self-righteousness.

Even if these were not the case, the fact remained that they were indeed enslaved. The apostle Paul, in our second lesson, reminds God’s people that we are indeed slaves to sin. All are sinners, all fall short of the glory of God. In the verses leading up to our second lesson, Paul, himself a Jew and a Pharisee, exclaims, What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one. Romans 3:9-10

The people in Jesus day lived under God’s Law, but they could not keep it. Their belief was that, if only they could keep from sinning, keep Gods law to the letter, they would inherit God’s kingdom. This is what they believed.

Today, we have so many believers who would think the same thing. The better you live your life, the more you keep the commandments, and the more good works you do will mean God will look upon you with favor. This is what so many believe, but it is not enough.

Again, Jesus says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Here is where we find the reason for celebration on the day we call Reformation Sunday. For so many believing Christians, Martin Luther being one of them, the truth is that no sinner has the ability to overcome the consequences of sin. We have to admit, we are in bondage to sin and we cannot free ourselves. No amount of believing, no amount of good works can make up for the disobedience of our sin.

To abide in Jesus’ words means more than simply believing he is who he says he is. That’s a good start, but it doesn’t end there. Abiding in Jesus’ words means to understand the truth and power of God’s love. It means to dwell in Christ, live in a close, loving relationship with him. It means we are to love God above all else,

especially love him more than we love ourselves, our comfortable lives and those things that bring us pleasure. To abide in Jesus' words means to abide in the whole of Scripture, God's Law and Gospel; to strive to live according to his commandments, loving and worshiping as we ought, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Believing alone cannot accomplish this. If we believe we can keep God's law, we once again miss the mark. The law exposes our sin. It convicts us; we are guilty. No, the law cannot save us, but it can drive us toward our Savior.

It takes faith. Only when we have faith, that gift of God poured out through the Holy Spirit, can we understand that, even as we confess to be sinners, God's salvation is attainable through Christ. Through faith, we are made to be recipients of God's grace. Faith makes us able to gladly receive the love of God and share it with our neighbor. Through faith, we are made to feel welcome at God's table of grace and receive the meal of forgiveness. Through faith, we share this gift with others, so they too might come, taste and see the goodness of God.

Perhaps then, through faith, believers might become witnesses to God's grace, making an appreciable difference within the community by being true disciples of Jesus Christ, disciples who know and believe the truth Christ speaks of; "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16.

Amen.