

Jesu Juva

“Unleashing the Word”

Text: John 8:31-36; Romans 3:19-28; Revelation 14:6-7

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Si vos manseritis in sermone meo, vere discipuli mei eritis, et cognoscetis veritatem, et veritas liberabit vos.

That's what you would have heard had you been sitting in church 500 years ago, in 1522. The Scriptures read in Latin. And you today understood as much as the people did then. A couple of you maybe know Latin. A few more of you know a little bit. Most of you could probably pick out a few words, like *discipuli*, disciples, or *veritas*, truth. But the meaning, the truth, what Jesus actually said there, no.

What Jesus said with those words was this, which you heard (in English) earlier: ***If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*** But how can you abide in Jesus' word if you cannot understand it? That was Luther's question. The people knew only what they were being told, but what they were being told wasn't the truth. They were being told to buy indulgences. They were being told to pay to view relics. They were being told to go to confession and do the satisfactions the priest told them to do. And they were being told that by doing these things, and others, that would set them free. Free from their sins. Free from purgatory.

But once Luther began reading the Scriptures himself, and studying them, and teaching them, he came across verses like we heard today. What we heard from John, that ***if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*** And what we heard from Paul, ***that there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [a sin offering] by his blood, to be received by faith.*** And this is what the people started to hear from him. The truth of the **Law**, that our sins cannot be paid for or atoned for by *anything* that we do. But even more, the truth of the **Gospel**, that all our sins have *already* been paid for or atoned for by Jesus on the cross. A gift He does not demand that we earn or pay for, but that He now gives to us freely, and we receive by faith.

We hear that all the time and so perhaps take it for granted. But imagine how that must

have sounded to those people hearing that for the first time! Some of you may even know how that feels, having been there yourself. Thinking that God is an angry, demanding judge, but then hearing that He is really a loving Father. Thinking that you have to be good enough for Him, but then hearing that you can't, so He came to do that for you. Thinking that holiness is only for really exceptional Christians, called saints, but then hearing that holiness, that sainthood is not an accomplishment, but something given to you when you are baptized, washed clean of your sins; and when you hear those words of Jesus that do what they say: *I forgive you all your sins*. No wonder this truth spread so far, so fast.

But without the people being able to abide in Jesus' word, abide in the Scriptures, nothing would really change. The people would simply be going from what one group of people told them was the truth to what another group of people told them was the truth to perhaps another group of people who told them a different truth in the future. The people would be at the mercy of those few who could read the Scriptures.

So Luther set to translating the Scriptures into German. And a German the people could understand. So that when it was read in church, they could hear it and understand it. So that with the advent of the printing press, many could purchase it and read it themselves. And education grew, too, to teach people how to read the language they spoke. So the people could abide in Jesus' word, and know the truth that sets them free.

So it was that in September of 1522, 500 years ago, Luther finished the translation of the New Testament into German. The September issue of the *Lutheran Witness* was all about this. I hope you got it. I hope you read it.

Now Luther was not against teachers of the Word. He was one! Luther was not an advocate of *every man for himself* and every person having their own interpretation of the Scriptures. As we heard Jesus say today, to abide in His Word is to know the truth. The one and only truth. The one and only truth that can set us free. So to this end, as Paul told the Ephesian Christians, Jesus *gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the **pastors and teachers**, to equip the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . .* (Ephesians 4:11-12). But not to follow these teachers blindly, but like the Berean Christians, to hear the Word of God proclaimed by Paul, and then *examine the Scriptures to see if these things were so* (Acts 17:11). To know that was is being said is in accord with the Word of God.

So abiding in the Word of Jesus is not every man for himself or believing the word of one man, but the one truth proclaimed by the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers of history. It is to hear them and read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them. It is to know the Scriptures - not just a verse here or a verse there, which maybe taken out of context can be made to mean all kinds of things! It is to know Genesis as well as you know John. To know Leviticus as well as you know Acts. To

know the Psalms as well as you know Romans. And to know that all of them - *all of them* - talk about, point to, and testify of Jesus. All of them revealing the problem of sin, and all of them proclaiming God's solution: the atonement of the cross and the forgiveness we have that flows from it. The joining of ourselves with all our sin to Jesus on the cross, so that we are also joined to Him in His resurrection to a life made new and free from sin (Romans 6:5). For as we heard from Revelation earlier, this Gospel is *an eternal gospel* - the good news from the beginning and without end, unchanging; and for *all who dwell on earth - every nation and tribe and language and people*. That all may know. That all may believe. That all may live. That all know the truth that sets them free. Free from sin for life now, and free from sin for life forever. Maybe that verse from Revelation - and especially that part about every language - was part of Luther's inspiration.

So what of us today, 500 years later? We who have the Scriptures in our own language? Not only in our Bibles, but in the liturgy, in our hymns, readily available on the internet in so many forms. We for whom the trouble today is maybe not hearing it or reading it or understanding it, *but believing it*? Believing what God says is true rather than what the world says is true. And adjusting our lives to the truth of the Word rather than adjusting the truth of the Word to fit our lives. What is it for you? What truth hard to swallow? What sin hard for you to give up? What part of your life do you really want to Word of God to stay out of? What truth of the Word . . . well, let's be blunt, embarrassing, because it's too old fashioned, too patriarchal, too limiting, too out of step with the times? So we just won't speak that part, think it no longer relevant. Save face with the world. If there was to be a Reformation of the Word today, what would it be? What would it need to be *for you*?

Each generation has its challenges - its challenges to the faith, its challenges to Jesus. But again, as we heard from Revelation, **the Gospel is eternal**. The Gospel is the answer to each and every challenge, to each and every sin, and for each and every life. *The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes* (Romans 1:16), Paul wrote to the Roman Christians - a verse which did influence Luther greatly. For, Paul goes on to say, the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God that is received by us by faith (v. 17). The righteousness we need, that is demanded by God but that we are powerless to achieve, is a gift. A gift **from heaven, by means** of the cross and empty tomb, **through** the font, the pulpit, the Scriptures, and the altar, and then to you. That by the power of the Spirit you say: **Yes! Amen! Truth!** And that truth of Jesus sets you free. Free from the guilt and condemnation of sin, free from death, free from fear, and free from a life of *slavery to sin*, to live a new and free life in Christ.

The Jews of Jesus' day thought that as children of Abraham, they were already free; they had never been slaves of anyone. And maybe we think that, too, that as Americans, we've never been slaves of anyone. We live in the land of the free and the home of the brave!

But are we free? Or is our captivity, our slavery to sin that much worse because we

cannot see it and do not realize it? Because we've been blinded by satan's lies and our own sinful desires? Because I think that doing whatever I want is freedom and having to follow God's Word is the real burden, the real slavery? But how utterly opposite the truth is! That Jesus sets you free from having to obey your sinful, fleshly urges and desires, and so sets you free to live a new and better life. Free from the world and its tyranny. Free from your flesh and its tyranny. Free from satan and his tyranny. Free from all that is reaching out to grab and control your heart and mind and desires, to live a life of love and forgiveness, with your heart and mind and desires filled with Jesus.

That is the life Jesus lived and showed us, and the life He now gives you. The life revealed to us in the Scriptures, and given to us by the Spirit working through them. That the Reformation be not just an historical event that happened some 500 years ago, but be a reality in your life. That the Reformation of the Church be also the reformation of your life, as you abide in the Word of Jesus, know the truth, live the truth, and live in His glorious freedom.

500 years ago, many people heard that truth for the very first time as they heard and understood the Scriptures for the very first time. How blessed we are to continue in that heritage, to continue in the Word. The Word spoken, poured, and now fed to us in the Body and Blood of Jesus, to set us free to be sons and daughters of God. And as we heard in that Word today: ***If the Son sets you free, you [are] free indeed!***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.