

The Truth Will Make You Free **John 8:31-36**

Reformation Sunday

As you all know, a bustling church season is coming. Along with many special worship services, I've needed to prepare for an exciting meeting, known as "the church conference." By the way, all of you are invited to the church conference on November 20th at 7 p.m. To prepare for the church conference, I had to call for a Nomination Committee meeting. The Nomination Committee meets once a year and searches for people to serve in leadership positions and as committee members. Sounds thrilling! As usual, it was not easy to find new people to fill the positions because there are not many new people. At the same time, I've realized there are so many committees and teams. Do you know how many committees and leadership teams we have? 15! I know that we want to responsibly and effectively operate the church, but sometimes, I feel that our Methodist systems have become unnecessarily complicated.

There is a joke about Methodists. Do you know how many Methodists it takes to change a light bulb in a sanctuary? The answer is Twenty-two. One to hold the ladder, one to climb the ladder and change the bulb, ten to form three committees to evaluate the effectiveness of the old light bulb, and ten to form a committee for a pot-luck to welcome in the new light bulb. This is a funny joke but it captures some truth about Methodists. I think that the United Methodist Church, its structures, policies and rules have become overly complicated. We must remember that the early Methodist movement was simple and clear and powerful!

John Wesley introduced three simple rules for holy living. "Do no harm. Do good. Stay in Love with God." John Wesley said, "these three rules help us love one God, and save many souls." It's very simple. But over time, the Methodist church became a complex institutional religion with an intricate denominational structure and sophisticated rules and policies. Do you think that we need to recite an 898 page-long Book of Discipline and an 873 page Book of Resolution in order to live holy lives? Maybe not. Instead of simply complying with what the conference or denomination says, we need to return to and re-form ourselves in accordance with the living Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Reformation Sunday

Today is Reformation Sunday and we celebrate the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, in 1517, Martin Luther posted Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther addressed a number of problematic teachings and doctrines, including salvation by works and the practice of selling indulgences. As you may know, Pope Leo X called for the sale of indulgences in Germany to help raise money to complete the construction of Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome. The Pope said that anyone who purchased these indulgences would be absolved of all sin. While this sounds like nonsense to us, their financial campaign was very successful. Everyone wants to get some kind of assurance of their salvation and indulgences were regarded as an entrance ticket to heaven! Don't get me wrong. I don't intend for you to have anti-Catholic sentiments or feel that we are better. I am telling you that even the church and its teachings are vulnerable to corruption.

When some of Luther's parishioners bought these indulgences and asked Luther about their validity, he knew something was not right and acted to correct it. Luther didn't merely comply with what the church said. He devoted himself to God, struggling to search and know the truth. As he understood the truth of God's grace given to us through Jesus Christ, he opened the door of the reformation movement with the slogan, "through Faith alone, by Scripture alone, in Christ alone, by Grace alone!" He was freed by grace and he wanted to free others through faith in Christ! Although we are Methodists, we share the same Protestant spirit that continually seeks to reform the church and free ourselves and the world.

Knowing that we are slaves to sin!

What frees us? Not our works! Not our knowledge of the doctrines! Not religious institutions! What frees us? Only the truth. In today's scripture, "Jesus said to the Jews who believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."(v 31-32) The truth frees us.

Then, what is truth? Many people say that we are living in post-truth America. Once upon a time, there was a time when, generally speaking, we agreed on what was real and what was not, regardless of our religions or political orientations. But not anymore! Gallup poll shows that only 32 percent of Americans have faith that TV, newspapers, and radio are reporting the news “fully, accurately, and fairly.” People don’t trust expertise and authority, and some of them believe that conspiracy theorists with crazy ideas on the internet are more trustworthy because they are more authentic and not part of the corrupt system. Your understanding of the facts, reality and truth is largely determined by the news outlets and social media platforms you watch. Some of those social media and news outlets spread poisonous misinformation, hatred, anger, antisemitism, racism, and violence. People are enslaved by deadly half-truths that they don’t even realize they are slaves to. Likewise, the Jews listening to Jesus assumed that they were not slaves to anyone or anything. But we are all slaves to something. Some are slaves to money. Some to political convictions, desire, anxiety, drugs, power, ego, sin and even blind religious belief! How can we be free from things that bind us?

The Truth Will Make You Free

Jesus said, “If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.” According to Jesus, his disciples would experience the truth that would free them. Then, how can one be Jesus' disciple? Living out his word! There is a connection between living out his word and experiencing liberating truth! Knowing the liberating truth is not a matter of head knowledge. Getting a Ph.D. in biblical study or theology is not a guarantee of knowing the truth that liberates us. Memorizing our Book of Discipline does not necessarily lead to liberating truth.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is God’s truth incarnate. Knowing the truth essentially means knowing Jesus Christ. It means trusting in him, staying in a relationship with him, and letting his words and his presence challenge us and change us! We experience this liberating truth only through living out his word in our daily lives. When we strive to live out Jesus’ word, we will know that “he is the way and the truth and the life.”(John 14:6) Freedom is a gift given to people who know the truth, Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther knew Christ, God’s truth incarnate. Because he experientially knew the truth that freed him from the bondage of sin and the bondage of the blind teachings of the church institution, he was able to discern what was not right and proclaim the liberating truth against the church. God’s truth also provided him the courage and strength for the difficult task of church reformation. As our opening hymn, we sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” According to Heinrich Heine, Luther and his friends sang this song as they entered the city, Worms on April 16, 1521. He was summoned by the emperor in order to renounce or reaffirm his Ninety-five Theses. He could have been condemned and executed. At that critical moment, he remembered that “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble!” so he sang “a mighty fortress is our God” as he entered the city and did not fear confessing his faith that opened up the waves of reformation. He could do this because he knew and experienced the liberating truth, our Christ.

On this Reformation Sunday, we are reminded that we can be freed only when we truly know Jesus Christ and accept him into our lives. When we remain in his teachings and live out his word, we can freely love our God and neighbors. Last Sunday, we had our Food for the Soul fundraising concerts. The church was full of people enjoying joyful music and laughter. We collected about thirteen hundred dollars to feed our neighbors in need. Reflecting on what happened at the concert, I feel that Christians are strange people. I don’t know all of them but most of them came from Zion, Asbury and Lakewood Baptist churches. They run the Food for Soul project which requires time, energy and money. They came to the fundraising concert and willingly donated their money for the project they run! They will volunteer for the Food for Soul ministry! Does it make sense? You work for it for free and even you pay for it for your free work! And you like it! It may not make sense to those who don’t experience the love of Christ! But this somewhat unreasonable act perfectly makes sense for us because we know the truth that frees us from selfishness. We know “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Act 29:35) Because Jesus Christ, the truth, liberates us, we can joyfully share what we have and freely serve our neighbors. I believe this is the heart of the reformation Spirit, reforming ourselves and our church in accordance with our living Christ and his love for us. You have been good reformers of Asbury and your lives. So let us continue to do this good work together! Amen.