

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Peter Strommen

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — John 8:31-36

31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’ 33They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free”?’

34 Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. 36So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

SERMON

Martin Luther had no intention of starting a reformation. He was just a conscientious soul struggling with his faith and when he eventually found peace through his study of Scripture, he became disturbed at the appalling difference between what Scripture taught and what people were being taught by the promotion of indulgences. As a teacher of the church, he thought it his duty to say something. And the rest, as they say, is history. But isn't that the way reforms often happen in the church? Someone is captured by a passion for God and doing the right thing. And something about their conviction rings true for others.

In today's Gospel passage from John, Jesus makes an important promise: “if you continue in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”. Isn't he describing what inspires Christian reform? You come to know Christ and are changed by Him. You begin to see things differently as a result. For my message this morning, I wish to focus on these words: “if you continue in my word, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Let's begin with the first part: “if you continue in my word” “Words” are powerful. Without words there would be no civilization. We could not pass on information and learning; in fact we could not relate to each other in many ways that make us distinctly human. The great Helen Keller, who lost both her hearing and her sight as a baby, found her whole life changed when

she made the connection between a sign and water - - this began her discovery of words and opened to her worlds she never could have known otherwise.

This is something of what Jesus means when he says “my word”. Jesus reveals God and shows us God's heart. He does this not only by what he says and what he does, but who he is. That's why John introduces him as the “Word” with a capital “W”. Jesus is God's word to us. And he opens to us what we could not know apart from him.

That's why Jesus tells those who would follow him: “if you continue in my word”. He means: live in my word, abide there. “Keep on keeping on”. The tense of the verb conveys on-going. He invites us on a journey as his disciples, which means “learners”. As Woody Allen said, “90% of success is just showing up” and that's not completely wrong here. To continue in Jesus' word includes showing up.

This first part is something Jesus urges us to do. The second part of his sentence is a promise, actually two promises. The first promise: “you will know the truth” and a second comes from the first, “and the truth will make you free”. “You will know the truth” promises Jesus. “Truth” here means much more than knowing true information. In fact, it mainly means we will come to know Jesus and we will find that he not only tells us the truth, he is the truth. His promise focuses on relationship. That's why he says we will “know” the truth.

Remember the movie “E.T.?” An extra-terrestrial is left behind and befriended, secretly, by a little boy named Elliot. Government security eventually comes to know about E.T., descends upon the household with white suits and all kinds of machinery. Only Elliot really knows E.T. - - he knows E.T. wants to go home and he is lonely and Elliot cares about him. When we learners come to know Jesus, beyond knowing about Jesus, we begin to grasp his truth. This is something beyond doctrines & religious practices. We find, in the words of the spiritual, that “He's never failed me yet”. Jesus does not turn out like the Ponzi scheme or the house of cards arranged to look better than it is. No, quite the opposite - - the more one comes to know Jesus, the more profoundly one comes to trust Him.

There is another promise in this sentence too. “If you continue in my word,” says Jesus “you will

know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” If you’ve been following the idea that Jesus is the truth, you see that knowing the truth sets us free. Jesus is truth but He also means for us to discover what is true - - for He sets us free from false ideas and half-truths about ourselves, others, the world and God.

C.S. Lewis, the great English writer and Christian liked a good story. He also wrote Christian truth in his stories. One story; “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” in which four brothers and sisters accidentally walk into a land called Narnia by way of an old closet wardrobe. Narnia is in perpetual winter because of a spell cast by its ruler, the White Witch. All she cares about is her power and control. The result is a society with no spring, no sunshine and warmth, and instead there is much mistrust and fear - - “always winter but never Christmas”. Lewis’ image for the power of sin is “frozen”.

But Lewis also has a figure of Christ - - Aslan the Lion - - who comes to Narnia after a long wait. And an interesting thing happens. The ice begins to melt. Sun breaks through the clouds. Buds begin to appear on the trees. There is the scent of spring in the air. His very presence is thawing the kingdom of ice.

This is what Jesus promises in the word “free”. And we Christians claim it in several ways. First, we believe Jesus’ promise that in him, our sin and guilt is forgiven. We enact this promise each time we receive communion and hear the words “given for you” and “shed for you”. And we repeat this promise in our liturgy of confession and forgiveness. And this holds true whether we feel it or not and whether we understand it or not.

But we also experience the work of Christ as we journey with him and come to know the truth. Sometimes this may be challenging: (Gloria Steinem once said “the truth does set you free, but first it will tick you off”). As we wrestle with the truth, we begin to notice the ice melt in our lives. As we come to know and trust God: we might notice a bud of reconciliation in a relationship we’d given up for dead, a ray of sunshine in a piece of life of which we were ashamed, a blade of grass where it seemed only a dead end, even, sometimes, dramatic changes of direction, as Martin Luther experienced. And do you know what? These signs are experienced as joy, as freedom. Jesus means for us to take him at his word. “If you continue in my word, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Let’s make a specific application of this promise. We need to take time, regularly, to put ourselves in a place where we can learn to know Christ’s word - - daily prayer, or, studying and meditating on Scripture, regular worship and the support of other Christians. Knowing Christ certainly comes through other ways, but I stress these practices because our society is incredibly busy. We are wired and barraged by stimulus everywhere. And often, what we most need is a space to hear that “still, small voice” of God that is heard by truly listening.

The hymn I chose that follows this sermon does not come from Martin Luther and the Reformation time. Rather, it comes from an area of the world (Tanzania) where faith is growing explosively. And although the music style is much different from Luther’s time, notice how the message reflects the same convictions we’ve been affirming this morning. We sing: “Listen, God Is Calling!” © 2011