**John 8:31-36 October 31, 2021 (Reformation Sunday)**

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

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson here re-reading these words. “So, Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As I stood yesterday wearing a cassock and my clerical collar during the Trunk or Treat event, I wrote down children’s costumes on a post it note and stuck them to a makeshift door of Wittenberg, I handed the children a hammer and asked them to hammer these “theses” onto the door to become Lutherans. As they left for many I said “Happy Reformation Day”. And for almost all of them the look on their faces gave me the impression, they had no idea what was going on. None of them came in their Martin Luther, Philip Melanchton, or Johann Tetzel costumes. It seems they just weren’t in the Reformation Day spirit. Some of us may even be convicted when we walked in this morning of the same thing, perhaps we’ve focused too much on the ghosts and the ghouls in the grocery store, or the candy sales and pumpkin patches, and are not sure why the altar colors are red in the first place, some of us may be even more convicted that we didn’t even notice the altar colors were red until I said something just now. Some of us may have forgotten about Reformation Sunday, entirely and are tuning in to watch this service days or weeks from now online.

How could we forget such a pivotal day in our lives as Lutherans, in the spark that led to the fire that led to Trinity Lutheran Church existing in Onekama, Michigan today? Sure, our lives are busy, but not too busy for the Reformation. I’m sure you remember at least the most basic elements of the story. Martin Luther, a lawyer turned monk, is plagued with a guilty conscience never finding relief from his sin and finally turns to the Word of God and has a revelation. He nails the 95 Theses to the Cathedral door in Wittenberg, Germany to spark debate over his findings but finds that the Church seeks only to keep him quiet. They want him to recant and he famously refuses. The Gospel would not be muzzled or silenced. Instead Martin Luther, who set out to debate and reform the church of his day ends up establishing a new church built on the truth that sinful man is saved by grace, through faith. A freedom that comes from hearing the truth, the very core of our Gospel lesson this morning from John chapter 8, “If you abide in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

So, in retrospect of the Reformation the question remains, was it all about a man? Was it all about a political and social movement? Or was it all about the message? The man is dead, and if you look into the later stages of Martin Luther’s life you find a man who had to deal with unspeakable sadness at the loss of a child, and also someone who was ill and passed away. You look at the life and experiences of his wife and find that they were poor, and she herself succumbs to illness. The man was flawed, in the cancel culture that we live in today he would have been canceled at the very start of the Reformation. This man was fearless in his beliefs, he was stubborn, he didn’t really care about hurting other people’s feelings when it came to the truth and he was blunt about it. He said very controversial things, he was not by any means perfect and although you can find statutes of Martin Luther at our Lutheran Seminaries in St. Louis and Fort Wayne, and even on certain Concordia Campuses, my alma mater of Concordia University Wisconsin in Mequon, we as Lutherans do not worship Luther. He is not the sole focus of our worship at any time, even on Reformation Sunday, even this year when Reformation Day falls on the actual Sunday! So today can’t possibly be all about the man.

What about the movement? We live in a world of constant political change. We live in a world where there seems to be movements of the people that spring up and there is a climate of change and reformation in our world today. It seems we’re always working toward reform and change and to progress from the old outdated ways of the past to a brighter new future. Was the Reformation nothing more than just a political movement? A breaking off of the supreme authority of the Church and instead giving power back to the people? Putting the Word of God into the hands of people in a language they could read so that their own interpretation became the sole authority of what God says? Well let’s look at that movement. Of course, at the time of Martin Luther there were established state religions that the people had to be part of, and the Reformation helped to free people from being coerced into their faith being based upon where they live. The people rose up against government, this was their chance to fight back, and sadly many were slaughtered in the Peasants War. These rebellions were rebuked by Luther himself, who never sought to overthrow anything, but simply to reform it. After Luther dies the church splintered, and look at the church today. Just saying you are a Lutheran isn’t a fully defined theology, as there are many other Lutheran churches who believe very different things when it comes to the core doctrines or teachings of the faith. Look at Manistee County and you will find many different denominations, synods and religious groups. The movement itself had positives but many negatives, and led to division. Today can’t possibly be all about the political or social movement of the Reformation.

But what about the Word itself? Hear again this key phrase from our Gospel lesson. 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.” If you abide in my *Word*. And the Word of Jesus is the very Bible that Luther was reading. It was the Word that brought the revelation. It was the Word that brought the Reformation. It was in the Word that Luther found the truth, the very truth of the world, because Jesus is himself the revelation of the Word, the entire Word of God, the entirety of the Bible is about Jesus Christ and so he therefore is the ultimate truth. The truth of freedom, which is what the people of the church at Luther’s time so desperately needed. To be free. Free from the guilt and worry of the weight of sin that wouldn’t let them ever breathe or come up for air because of the continuous teaching of a wrathful and angry God who sought only to destroy them. Free from the guilt of thinking their relatives were in a state of waiting for them to give more money and free them from the eternal waiting room known as purgatory. Free from the blindness that comes from not being able to read the truth of the Gospel and study the true Word of God from their own Bible in their own language. And all that changed in the Reformation.

Now they were free. Free from sin, just as we are, because we know the truth of the Word of God. The Word of God is the revelation of Jesus Christ. And Paul lays it out for us in Romans 3, which became the foundation of the Reformation, in the proper understanding of the doctrine of justification. That you are declared “not guilty” before God the Father because of the work of God’s Son Jesus Christ. “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin….For 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……For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”

For by works of the law, meaning our own works, the things that we do trying to appease God in the same way that the people of Luther’s time did. Works of buying indulgences, works of penance any works that we do, we will not find justification for our actions in what we do, because the law acts as a mirror to us of seeing how we will never do enough. Through the law comes knowledge of sin, and sin leads to the despair that we find at the time of Luther and the despair we see all around us today. All have sinned, all face the death sentence, all have the fear of what sin will lead to, but here was the light that pierced through all the fear and the darkness, the truth that Martin Luther revealed to the world not because he was a great man, and not because the world was waiting for a political movement, but because the power of the Word, the power of God is so great it can pierce the thickest darkness. “And are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Justified, declared not guilty by his grace, his undeserved love for you. You, who stand accused by Satan, by your sin, by the law which reveals you to be a sinner, stand before God and are declared not guilty by the greatest defense attorney who ever lived, God’s own Son Jesus Christ. Who stands in your stead and defends you, knowing you are guilty of sin, knowing of your rebellion, but showing love to you and paying the price of your sin on the cross. That’s the redemption. He has bought you back, and in redemption language is how he did it, which brings us back to the Word which shows us a God who doesn’t hate you, who doesn’t wish to destroy you, who doesn’t want your money just so you can save your loved ones from pain, but a God who loves you and sent His Son to die for you.

Martin Luther found that truth, so may we not forget it. May we find joy in any anniversary of this momentous moment in history whether we gather for worship on the actual date of the posting of the 95 theses or not. May we find joy in our lives as we bear the title of Lutheran but ultimately as we bear the name of Jesus Christ. For we are Christians together, following that man, Jesus Christ, not a sinful and imperfect man Martin Luther. We are followers of the Son of God and Savior of the world, not a movement that fizzled out or changed directions. It’s not about the man. It’s not about the movement. It’s all about the Word made flesh, who has given you salvation by grace through faith as a gift. Give thanks and rejoice, today is a day of a grand celebration. Today is Reformation Day.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.