

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2020  
REFORMATION SUNDAY  
JOHN 8:31-36  
FREEDOM IN TRUTH, TRUTH IN FREEDOM

HOW MANY OF YOU ARE LIFE-LONG LUTHERANS? HOW MANY OF YOU WERE RAISED IN ANOTHER CHURCH BACKGROUND OR NO BACKGROUND AT ALL? WELL, TODAY IS REFORMATION SUNDAY. AND FOR LUTHERANS, THAT MEANS CELEBRATING THE ROOTS OF OUR SPIRITUAL HERITAGE.

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS WE LEARN IN LIFE THESE DAYS IS THAT THERE ARE **NO ABSOLUTES**. HOW OLD DO CHILDREN HAVE TO BE BEFORE THEY DISCOVER THAT IF MOM SAYS “NO,” YOU GO ASK DAD... OR VICE VERSA - ‘CAUSE THERE STILL MAY BE A “YES” TO BE HAD SOMEWHERE.

AND BY THE TIME WE REACH ADULTHOOD, WE’VE GOT THIS THING DOWN PAT. THINK OF ALL THE SAYINGS THAT REINFORCE THE LACK OF ANY ABSOLUTES. YOU COULD PROBABLY SAY THEM WITH ME...

- “RULES ARE MADE TO BE... BROKEN.”
- “THERE IS AN EXCEPTION TO EVERY... RULE.”
- “THE ONLY CERTAINTIES IN LIFE ARE DEATH AND... TAXES.”
- “IT ONLY MATTERS IF YOU GET... CAUGHT.”

WE DO WHAT WE DO AT ST. JOHN’S BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT THERE IS INDEED SUCH A THING AS ABSOLUTE TRUTH, AS REVEALED IN SCRIPTURE. AND WE WANT TO WITNESS TO THAT TRUTH.

WE DO WHAT WE DO, BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT ITS NOT OUR PLACE TO QUESTION GOD’S WORD; IT’S NOT OUR PLACE TO CHANGE IT OR JUDGE IT. WE DON’T STAND OVER THE WORD OF GOD, BUT UNDER IT, WHERE IT FUNCTIONS TO QUESTION AND JUDGE AND CHANGE US!

THAT’S WHY WE ARE HERE ON THIS REFORMATION SUNDAY - TO AFFIRM WITH MARTIN LUTHER THAT WE ARE MERELY STEWARDS, CALLED TO HONOR THE WORD AND STUDY THE WORD AND MEMORIZE THE WORD AND MOST OF ALL, HAND IT ON - INTACT TO THE NEXT GENERATION OF BELIEVERS.

**SANCTIFY US IN YOUR TRUTH, O LORD, YOUR WORD IS TRUTH.**

THE TRAGEDY OF MODERN FAITH IS THAT WE NO LONGER *FEAR* GOD. AS A RESULT, WE HAVE ENDED UP WITH A FORM OF FAITH THAT ATTRACTS MANY PEOPLE, BUT

TRANSFORMS NO ONE.

IN A TIME WHEN CHRISTIANS ARE OVERLY CAREFUL NOT TO OFFEND OR EXCLUDE OR MAKE ANYONE FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE, THESE WORDS OF JESUS ECHO DOWN THROUGH THE AGES: **“IF YOU CONTINUE IN MY WORD, YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH WILL MAKE YOU FREE.”**

**IF...**

INTERESTINGLY, WILLIAM BARCLAY TELLS US THAT THE WORD USED IN THE BIBLE FOR “TRUTH” HAS THREE MEANINGS.

- IT'S A WORD USED TO DESCRIBE A WRESTLER GRABBING AN OPPONENT BY THE THROAT.
- IT'S A WORD MEANING, “TO FLAY AN ANIMAL.”
- IT'S A WORD USED TO DESCRIBE THE HUMILIATION OF A CRIMINAL WHO WAS PARADED IN FRONT OF A CROWD WITH A DAGGER TIED TO HIS NECK - ITS POINT UNDER HIS CHIN - SO THAT HE COULD NOT PUT HIS HEAD DOWN.

THAT'S WHAT THE TRUTH IS LIKE. IT GRABS US BY THE THROAT. IT FLAYS US WIDE OPEN. IT FORCES US TO LOOK INTO THE FACE OF GOD HUMBLY AND WITHOUT PRETENSE.

UNFORTUNATELY, THOSE OF US WHO HAVE BEEN ENTRUSTED WITH THE TERRIFYING, FRIGHTENING GOOD NEWS (WHICH HURTS BEFORE IT FEELS GOOD) HAVE BECOME OBSESSED WITH MAKING CHRISTIANITY SAFE.

WE'VE OFFERED THE WORLD A SAVIOR WHO MEETS ALL OUR NEEDS BUT DEMANDS NOTHING.

WE ARE AFRAID OF A LOT THESE DAYS. WE'RE AFRAID OF TERRORISM AND UNEMPLOYMENT. WE'RE AFRAID OF DISEASE, AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE DOLLAR. WE'RE AFRAID OF NOT BEING FULFILLED. WE'RE AFRAID OF GLOBAL WARMING. BUT WE DO NOT FEAR GOD.

THOSE DEFINITIONS OF TRUTH MAKE ME WONDER IF THE CHURCH COULD EVER BE A PLACE OF HEALTHY FEAR AGAIN. A PLACE WHERE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS NOT JUST A SET OF BELIEFS, BUT A BURNING AND URGENT PRESENCE OF THE HOLY.

CAN THE CHURCH BECOME A DANGEROUS PLACE AGAIN, WHERE NOTHING IS SAFE IN GOD'S PRESENCE EXCEPT US? NOTHING - INCLUDING OUR PLANS, OUR PRIORITIES, AND OUR POLITICS? NOTHING - INCLUDING OUR POSSESSIONS AND PREFERENCES?

**“IF YOU CONTINUE IN MY WORD,”** JESUS SAID, **“YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH. WE DO**

WHAT WE DO TODAY BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT GOD IS SOVEREIGN, AND WE ARE NOT.

THE JEWS IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON THOUGHT THAT THEY WERE THEIR OWN MASTERS, THAT THEY WERE HOLY BY VIRTUE OF BEING, WELL... JEWISH... OF HAVING THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS.

BUT THE COMMANDMENTS SAY OTHERWISE. GOD'S LAWS APPLY TO EVERYONE. THEY ARE ABSOLUTE, WITHOUT SO MUCH AS AN INCH OF WIGGLE ROOM.

ACCORDING TO THE TORAH, USING GOD'S NAME IN VAIN IS NOT JUST A BAD IDEA, BUT THE LORD WILL NOT ACQUIT ANYONE WHO DOES SO. ON AND ON THE COMMANDMENTS GO... "REMEMBER... HONOR... YOU SHALL NOT."

GOD DIDN'T BRING ISRAEL TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE AT MT. SINAI, BECAUSE HIS DECREES WEREN'T UP FOR A VOTE. INSTEAD, HE GAVE THEM CLEAR BOUNDARIES WHICH WERE TO GOVERN THEIR COMMON LIFE.

BUT WITH RULES THIS ABSOLUTE, SURELY THERE MUST BE SOME LENIENCY - SOME FLEXIBILITY IN HOW (OR IF) PEOPLE ARE ABLE TO MEET THEM. THAT'S ONLY FAIR AND REASONABLE ISN'T IT?

WELL, NO IT'S NOT. AT LEAST NOT ACCORDING TO JESUS. PEOPLE WERE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR LOOPHOLES WITH CHRIST, BUT HE JUST KEPT TIGHTENING THE KNOT.

WE SEE THIS MOST CLEARLY IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, WHERE HE EQUATES INSULTS AND ANGER WITH MURDER, WHERE A LUSTFUL GLANCE IS ADULTERY, AND WHERE, IF SOMEBODY HITS YOU IN THE FACE, YOU ARE OBLIGED - OBLIGATED - TO TURN THE OTHER CHEEK AND LET THEM HIT YOU AGAIN.

GOD HAS REASONS FOR THESE ABSOLUTE COMMANDS. ABOVE ALL, TO PROTECT FAMILY AND COMMUNITY. KILLING, CHEATING, DISRESPECT, AND BEARING FALSE WITNESS CREATE ANARCHY.

SO IT'S NOT HARD TO MAKE A CASE FOR THE *WISDOM* OF GOD'S COMMANDS, ITS JUST THAT THERE'S NO RELIEF FROM THEM, AND NO POSSIBILITY OF MEETING THEM PERFECTLY.

ANY GRADE BELOW 100% IS FAILING, AND THERE ISN'T A LICK OF EXTRA CREDIT. SIN RUNS SO DEEP IN US THAT WE CAN'T BE TOTALLY OBEDIENT (THAT'S WHY JESUS SAYS WE ARE SLAVES TO IT). YET NO OFFENSE IS TOLERATED.

WHICH CAN ONLY LEAVE US IN **ABSOLUTE DESPAIR**. AND THAT IS *EXACTLY* WHERE

GOD NEEDS US TO BE. FOR ONLY WHEN WE ARE *CORNERED* DOES IT BECOME CLEAR TO US THAT THE LORD ALONE CAN SAVE US FROM OURSELVES.

ONLY WHEN WE ARE CORNERED DOES IT BECOME CLEAR THAT THE LORD ALONE CAN RESCUE US FROM SIN, DEATH, AND THE POWER OF THE DEVIL.

WE FANCY OURSELVES TO BE FREE, BUT ITS POSSIBLE TO BE A SLAVE TO YOUR JOB, SO THAT YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE APART FROM YOUR WORK. IT'S POSSIBLE TO BE A SLAVE TO THINGS, SO THAT YOU SPEND ALL YOUR TIME PROTECTING THEM AND CARING FOR THEM AND DREAMING ABOUT HOW YOU CAN GET EVEN MORE THINGS.

SOME ARE ENSLAVED TO DESTRUCTIVE HABITS THAT THEY CAN'T SEEM TO BREAK. OTHERS ARE ENSLAVED TO ANGER, WHICH CONTROLS THEIR TONGUES, AND DESTROYS THEIR RELATIONSHIPS. SOME ARE ENSLAVED TO SENSUAL IMPULSES THAT CONTROL THEIR BODIES. AND THE LIST GOES ON.

ACCORDING TO JESUS, SIN IS A FAILURE TO TRUST GOD. SIN IS ALLOWING OURSELVES TO BE MASTERED BY ANYTHING OR ANYONE OTHER THAN THE LORD WHO MADE US.

BUT UNTIL EVERY LAST LEG OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS IS KNOCKED OUT FROM UNDER US, WE SINNERS WILL STILL SEEK LOOPHOLES INSTEAD OF REPENTANCE.

LUTHERAN THEOLOGIAN GERHARD FORDE ONCE SAID, "*THE ONLY SOLUTION TO ABSOLUTES IS ABSOLUTION.*" AND THAT IS WHAT GOD, IN HIS MERCY, HAS DONE FOR US THROUGH CHRIST JESUS.

WHEN SELF-SUFFICIENT SINNERS PUT HIM TO DEATH ON A CROSS, GOD WOULD NOT BE STOPPED. HE RAISED JESUS FROM DEATH, SO THAT HIS FORGIVENESS WOULD BE AS ABSOLUTE AS HIS COMMANDMENTS.

WE ARE DOING THIS NEW THING TODAY, BECAUSE WE WANT TO WITNESS TO THAT FORGIVENESS THAT CAN'T BE EARNED, BUT ONLY RECEIVED AND CELEBRATED.

BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE. **GOD'S FORGIVENESS DOES NOT ABOLISH HIS COMMANDS.** IT DOESN'T DIMINISH HIS LAW OR LOWER HIS EXPECTATIONS ONE BIT.

GOD STILL HOLDS ALL THE CARDS. BUT ON THIS SIDE OF THE EMPTY TOMB, **THE LAW NO LONGER HAS THE LAST WORD. JESUS DOES.**

HE IS THE LIVING WORD WHO CAME THAT WE MIGHT HAVE LIFE, AND HAVE IT ABUNDANTLY.

AS YOU COME TO THE TABLE FOR COMMUNION IN A FEW MOMENTS, REMEMBER THAT.

THE VERY GOD WHO INSISTS ON THE ABSOLUTENESS OF THE LAW, ALSO INSISTS ON HIS ABSOLUTE LOVE AND GRACE FOR YOU.

THIS IS THE TRUTH THAT MAKES US FREE, INDEED.

THIS IS THE TRUTH THAT THE WORLD NEEDS.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS!  
AMEN.