

Reformation and Homecoming Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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It's like Jesus understood the future when he said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Maybe Jesus knew that 2016's word of the year would be "post-truth."¹ Perhaps he anticipated the rise of nationalism, the flood of fake news, and cultivation of alternative facts. After hearing the Judeans' response to Jesus's statement, we discover that their world and our world are remarkably similar.

You see, the Judeans offered alternative facts claiming that their people were never slaves. But, if you know the biblical story, this retort is laughable. We could make a long list of the many times they had been controlled by outsiders. In fact, Judaism's primary story revolves around their slavery in Egypt and the liberation that follows. Again, generations after the Exodus they were ruled by the Assyrians and the Persians. And today's story puts Jesus and the Judeans under Roman authority. It's clear that these Judeans misstated or misunderstood the truth.

This distortion of truth is all too common. We have seen these post-truth ideologies throughout history. Alternative truths dominated Nazi Germany,² the church spread fake news about the native peoples of the Americas, and Martin Luther opposed alternative theological facts. So too, we are experts in self-deception. We spread idyllic images on social media glossing over reality, we tell our friends that our life is totally satisfying, we trick our boss into thinking that we know everything, and we look in the mirror pretending we are self-made and in control.³

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/16/post-truth-named-2016-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries/?utm_term=.0f1bd9551f65

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/alternative-facts-bonhoeffer%E2%80%99s-germany>

³ http://www.davidlose.net/2017/10/reformation-sunday-the-truth-about-the-truth/#_ftn1

That's part of human nature, we easily gravitate towards alternative facts and post-truth ideologies. We'd rather be moved by emotion and personal belief than look at reality. When a situation is shaped by opinion, it's more simplistic, easier to claim, and, in the end, we win. You see, "post-truth" may be a newer word in the dictionary, but the reality behind it is as old as time.

So, when Jesus says, "The truth will make you free," it might sound like more of a threat than liberation. The truth, after all, is a disappointment because it reveals sin. According to Luther, sin is to be curved inward on ourselves. Sin is when we think about ourselves without a thought about God or our neighbor. Sin includes passive aggression and alcoholism. Sin is devaluing the other's humanity and disrespecting diverse opinions. Sin is racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and any other power-based -ism. Sin allows us to linger in post-truth and bathe in alternative facts all while lying to ourselves about reality. Sin makes the truth feel like a liability.

Yet, when we step out of the whirlpool of sin and see the swirling self-centered and egotistical existence in which we float, then we can appreciate God's grace. Once we recognize reality, we can see the incredible gift we've been given. In our truth-telling, we can come clean about reality. In truth-telling, we discover that we *are* sinners. We discover that we fail often, that we are confused, that we are imperfect, and that nothing is going to change. But, that's not the only truth we discover. Although we are sinners, we are simultaneously God's beloved children. We are sinners whom God calls blessed. We are sinners for whom Christ died. We are sinners whose futures are not determined by regrets and mistakes; instead, our future is established in the possibilities created by resurrection and love. The reality is that you are imperfect *and* you are loved;

you are selfish *and* altruistic; you are a sinner *and* a saint. That is the good news. That is the real news. That is the truth.⁴

Today, as we recall the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, we focus on the goal of the Reformation, namely to uncover truth. In a moment, we will celebrate by reclaiming the baptismal truth. For, in baptism, we name the world's alternative truth and put it in conversation with God's truth. In baptism, we make promises not in fear or obligation; instead, we commit to possibility, so that the world might be transformed and reformed by truth. There, at the font, we begin our work for justice and peace as God's truth-tellers. In that spirit, I invite you to allow the reformation to come alive in your truth-telling. So, take a moment to think and perhaps use the small space above my name on page two of your bulletin to jot down a response to this question: where are you called to reform the world by sharing God's truth?

Wherever God is calling you to be a truth-teller, you're not alone. Each week, we gather at this table for sustenance in the journey. We need this gift of grace and love because outside those doors we'll strive to confront fake news with humility and a willingness to be corrected. On the other side of those windows we'll struggle to recognize our bias and respect others. Even within these walls we'll need the strength to utter the truth that we are both flawed and precious.⁵

So, on this Reformation Sunday, we recommit ourselves to truth at the font. We gather at this table to be strengthened for God's work. And, then, we are sent to be truth tellers, because "the truth *will* make you free." Amen.

⁴ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/10/sermon-on-why-the-gospel-is-more-wizard-of-oz-y-than-the-law/>

⁵ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/virtues-we-need-post-truth-world?reload=1509204785900>