

Reformation and Homecoming Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

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Today's gospel reading is a short exchange between Jesus and Judean people who believed in him. One of the stand-out phrases is, "you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." It's a simple formula: if you know truth, then you find freedom. But, is it really all that easy? After all, in an era with access to information and expert opinions literally in our hands, you'd think that we would know the truth. But, in my experience, truth can be elusive. As a people, we have trouble recognizing fact-based truths from alternative facts. We have problems discerning between clickbait and real news. With an abundance of sources at our fingertips, who has time to sort through it all? The more simplistic option is to either grasp onto the source that aligns with our perspective or the one that ignites our emotion.

But, Jesus said, "you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Let's suppose we know truth; then, we might wonder what are we freed from? After all, we live in a republic; *we* make the rules; and, we are beholden to no one. We are self-made Americans. And, this is the same demeanor the Judeans had while talking with Jesus. They argued with Jesus that their source of freedom came from Abraham and that they were never in bondage. However, we know that this story is a revisionist history; because, they had long been ruled by outsiders. We hear about it in a central story within Judaism when those enslaved by the Egyptians were liberated. And, these are the same people who were subjected to the rule of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and, as they had this conversation with Jesus, they were under the rule of the

Romans. So, it's untrue for them to say that they were free, for they were bound to systems and people outside of their own control.

So too, we do a pretty good job of ignoring, revising, or forgetting our history along with our present reality. We forget that every human-made economic system – whether a traditional economy, command economy, market economy, or mixed economy – all types of economies enslave and oppress someone. And, when we live and operate within an economic system, we become bound to that system.

What that means in our American context is that we become ruled by capitalism. We make up status rankings. We advertise to create the perception of a need. And, this system binds us to the objective of constantly striving, consistently doing whatever it takes to move up the ladder, and clearly uses our energy for something that drains our lives. Do you get what I'm saying? You know, when we are after the newest car, when our car runs perfectly well. When we spend thousands of dollars to get a selfie in front of some far-off monument, with no concern for the environmental impact it carries. In those situations and many more, we take the good things that God has provided and we make it about ourselves.

And, that is what both our denomination's namesake, Martin Luther, and an early African theologian, Augustine of Hippo, would define as sin. That is, sin is the condition that we find ourselves in where we take all the goodness of God in the world—namely all of the resources, time, and energy—and we take that goodness and make it about ourselves. The crux of this understanding is that sin is not only an action; rather, sin is also a reflection of the underlying condition. Dr. Mark Tranvik describes it like this: “An addict may steal or lie in the name of their habit but the real problem is not the theft or deception. The main issue is the enslavement or bondage

to the craving for the drug.”¹ And so, the sin is not that we bought a new wardrobe with perfectly good clothing in our closets; rather the issue is that we are enslaved to a system that gives us a “high” from shopping, consuming, and wreaking havoc on others locally and globally with no concern for anyone else besides ourselves. We are caught up and forced to work within all sorts of systems that are imperfect and draw us into a bondage that makes each and every one of us a slave to sin. For, Jesus said in today’s gospel that, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

But, Jesus also said, “the truth will make you free.” You see, in John’s gospel, Jesus is the conduit of truth for the people who already believe in him (John 1). And, in continuing in Jesus’s words, there we find truth and freedom. For, in John’s gospel, Jesus’s truth is *for* the world but does not *derive* its values from the world. Jesus’s truth is communicated at a washbasin when he washes his disciples’ feet in an act of self-giving love (John 13). Jesus’s truth is found in the radical generosity given for all at a wedding feast (John 2). Jesus’s truth is found in inter-faith dialogue and acts of love with a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4). And, we have the opportunity to continue in Jesus’s words of truth. We have the possibility of being brought into alignment with God’s word. And, in that, we can acknowledge that we are not God; we acknowledge that we are bound to systems of oppression that rule our lives and our operations and often go unnoticed or completely ignored; and, we can embody God’s love while recognizing that we are not obligated to destroy ourselves. Instead, we can take moments, like Jesus, to refresh and realign our work, and then we can walk into the world to live out God’s truth in word and action.

And that is what the reformers, during the protestant reformation, were looking to do; that is, they were looking to live out the truth of God in word and deed. The

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1632

consistent reformation of the church to do this same work is not easy, nor will it be accepted with the grace and truth that Jesus invites us to experience. Nevertheless, as a congregation and a denomination, we look for opportunities to better live out Jesus's truth and bring God's freedom. So, in August, when our denomination made an inter-religious commitment calling us to seek understanding with people of other faiths that includes accompaniment with those who seek justice, peace, human wholeness, and well-being; in that action, we worked to see Jesus's truth and experience the deliverance from generations of warfare, distrust, and demonization.² Or, when we at Wicker Park Lutheran partner with our denomination to apologize for the ways our churches, our theology, and our actions have been complicit and intentional in perpetuating racism. Including, the ways that we propagate images of God that are only reflective of the dominate, white race to the ways our religious leaders have remained silent to racial injustices. When we make this apology, we begin to embody Jesus's words to love all people so that God's divine truth may set us all free.³

So, friends, there it is. We have a God who grants us freedom. While we tend to make all of God's goodness about ourselves, our God reminds us of God's abundance. God's abundant love, God's abundant truth, and God's abundant opportunity to use our gifts to witness to abundant life for all. And, that is the truth, and the truth shall set you free. Amen.

² https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Inter-Religious_Policy_Statement.pdf

³ https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Slavery_Apology_Explanation.pdf?_ga=2.68868889.907156050.1571940593-1491195128.1571427587