

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today we're jumping back into John's gospel. While we hear this same text every year on Reformation Sunday, there are some deep facets to explore together as we celebrate 145 years of ministry at the corner of Hoyne Ave. & Le Moyne St. in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago. We're going to focus on those first two verses. Hear them again: Jesus said to those who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

What we first glimpse is that Jesus is talking to the people who are already following Jesus. This isn't a text converting people; rather, Jesus is talking to those who already identify as Christ followers, or these days we might say those who are Christians. And he said, "if you *continue* in my word." This is where things get interesting.

The word translated here as "word" in Greek is *logos* which should not be confused with two other Greek words that are also translated the same way. They are *rhema* and *graphe*. You see, these three Greek words translated into English as "word" all carry different meanings and emphasis. *Rhema* is "word" in a spoken sense and is meant for a specific application of a broader message. *Graphe* is "word" in terms of a written text or what we might call a "writing" or "Scripture." But, *logos* carries a different and more forceful meaning. *Logos* is a broad, general expression of ideas of truth. *Logos* is

what John uses to describe Jesus early in the gospel. *Logos* is about the divine embodiment. It's about the revealed word of God or the divine expression of God's mind and reason as represented in Christ. In short, *Logos* is the embodiment of God's vision, teachings, and being in the world.

For 145 years, Wicker Park Lutheran Church has been working to embody this sense of *logos*. After all, it was a unique thing 145 years ago that Lutherans would have founded an English-speaking congregation. At that time, you had your Germans, your Swedish, your Norwegians, and many other specific ethnic enclaves of Lutherans settling in the United States. Each time they'd settle, they would often setup a Lutheran church in their language to be a religious and cultural center for their ethnic-specific interests. Yet, Wicker Park Lutheran Church choose something different. They chose to come together as Germans and various Scandinavian traditions to build a church together using English as its basis. It was a unique beginning. It was a commitment to divine unity as they embrace Christ's *logos*.

And these individuals were settling in during an interesting time and place. Wicker Park was transitioning from rural farmland into a residential neighborhood. It was only recently annexed into the city of Chicago in 1869 and was on the far northwest side of the city. At that time the borders of the city were roughly Fullerton to the north, Western to the west, and 39<sup>th</sup> Street to the south. Much of the existing city was being reconstructed after the 1871 Chicago fire, and the city needed more space. European immigrants were causing a massive population boom and many immigrated to live in Wicker Park. At the same time, labor-rights activism was become more important as those immigrants were being taken advantage of with low wage, unsafe

working environments, shifts that were 12-16 hours a day, and factories populated with young children.

To give you another perspective, let's think about some important Chicago institutions in relation to our congregation's founding. Who has heard of Jane Addams' Hull House? It's the well-known settlement house that would support newly arrived immigrants and working-class families in Chicago's poorest neighborhoods while also being a hub for social reform advocacy. Well, when the church was founded, the Hull House was over a decade away from beginning. Chicago is also known as the birthplace of the modern skyscraper, and when our congregation was founded that first skyscraper was a handful of years from being built. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Field Museum, Wrigley Field, University of Chicago, and Route 66 all did not exist. And, what would eventually be known as the Art Institute of Chicago had only been founded three months before. It was a different time when our ancestors of faith began this faith community. Nevertheless, they took up an unfinished, wooden, Gothic-style church building at this very corner, finished it, and began serving the community. Then, in 1906, they outgrew that building and needed something a bit more fireproof, so they built this stone structure. Today, the chairs Vicar and I sit in and the credence table in the back with an icon and the bread for communion are all original to that gothic style church.

Over the next almost 120 years, the congregation navigated complex political and social environments. Both World Wars impacted the congregation, especially the Second World War and the return of our soldiers that preceded white flight and birth of the interstate system which both

decimated Wicker Park. The church experienced women's suffrage movements giving women the right to vote. We made it through The Great Depression. Our ancestors rejoiced as penicillin was discovered and saved millions of lives. More recently, we remember the civil rights movement and the famed Division Street Riots of 1966 after police shot a young Puerto Rican man during a Puerto Rican Day celebration. The church lived through and was shaped by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the creation of the Internet, the end of Apartheid, September 11, Wicker Park gentrification, the Human Genome Project, COVID-19, and so many more. If you know our history, there were numerous times when the congregation imagined throwing in the towel and packing up shop. Yet, through it all, those gathered here knew the commitment they had to being the embodied *logos* in this community.

Throughout our history the church innovatively used a horse-drawn Sunday School bus to bring children to Sunday School. During the Vietnam War, the congregation welcomed Vietnamese refugees to live in the former parsonage. In the 1960s and 1970s when local schools had children an average of three years behind on reading skills, we started an afterschool tutoring program. The congregation hired a Spanish-speaking pastor when the community was mostly Spanish-speaking. You see, every time the environment changed, this congregation would see where they were located in the cultural, social, and political environment of the time and they would take on the difficult work of reforming how they worked to step up to embody God's *logos* in new ways. This congregation has a long legacy of living out what it means to be a reforming church.

Friends, as we look into the near future, I know that many of you look to the election in 8 days and wonder what our world might look like thereafter. I've heard your fears of what could be. I've heard your rising anxiety about how the election might impact our republic, the right for you to love who you love, and the fundamentals of a peaceful transfer of power. I know concerns about the economy, reproductive rights, voter rights, and foreign policy all weigh heavy on your hearts. I know that the political rhetoric is far too reminiscent of what we heard from leaders of the Third Reich in Germany. I hear you. I see you. I know your feelings.

What I do not know is what will happen in just over a week. However, what I do know is that no matter what happens we at Wicker Park Lutheran Church, we will be here together. We have been in this place as the *logos* of Christ for 145 years and that is not going to change. We will continue to stand up for Christ's values of welcoming all people without exception. We will continue to welcome the immigrant and the stranger. We will continue to value the humanity of those with disabilities. We will continue to be a beacon of God's love, hope, and justice in this city and beyond. We will continue to embody the *logos* of God as we have done for 145 years. And I know that with certainty because Jesus reminded us today that, "If you continue in my word (*logos*), you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Friends, the truth is that we have a faith built on freedom that liberates us from fear. We have freedom in knowing that we do not have to work to earn salvation. And the freedom from God then compels us to love one another, not because of self-interest or fear of punishment, but out of gratitude and

compassion. So, as you vote, be reminded of God's *logos*. Vote with your faith. Vote with your values. Vote for people and compassion. Vote for freedom and love. Vote for peace and justice. Vote in ways that continue to follow in the *logos* of our loving God. For in that act of embodying Christ's *logos* you will know the truth that our God reveals. You will know the love that our God shares. You will know the freedom that we celebrate this Reformation Day and, God willing, the continuation of our beloved church for at least another 145 years. Happy Anniversary, dear Church. Let us celebrate and let us embody God's *logos* in the journey ahead. Amen.