

The Truth Will Set You Free

October 30, 2022

Reformation Day [Year C]

The Lutheran Church of the Covenant

Maple Heights, Ohio

75th Anniversary

Jeremiah 31:31–34; Psalm 46; Romans 3:19–28; John 8:31–36

My friends, grace to you and peace from God our Creator, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is a joy to be here with you today as you celebrate 75 years of mission and ministry here at 19000 Libby Road.

My wife, Linda, and I have looked forward to this day ever since the invitation was extended several months ago; and we have been reminiscing and recalling moments and events that took place during the five years that we were with you from 2009 to 2014.

It would be tempting to make this sermon a litany of all we experienced in that time, but I will exercise some self-control and wait until later to share some of them with you during the luncheon and fellowship that follows worship.

But let me say that, for me, and I feel confident I can speak for Linda as well, the time spent here among you were five of my happiest years in ministry.

Despite the daily one-hour commute from Canton, I looked forward each day to coming into the building, eager and anxious to find out what the day would bring and what surprises God had in store for me.

Let me also express my gratitude to those of you from the Lutheran Church of the Master that have joined us for this festive occasion.

The mutually supportive relationship that exists between these two congregations is a gift to both communities and is, in my mind at least, a vision of how the church should be.

And I have not lost hope that it can be strengthened even further as you move forward into the future together.

Let us pray. Gracious Lord, for 75 years you have been our guide leading us on our journey through our fears and doubts to times of hope and peace. Now through your Word keep us secure in the faith that we are saved by grace, not by our merits. Open us to put our trust in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, not in our good deeds. Lead us all to find the truth, to believe, and to proclaim your Word in its truth. By your word, set us free to live as you would have us live, always loving others and loving you. Now let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our collective hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Today we rejoice as we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Lutheran Church of the Covenant and, at the same time, observe the 505th Anniversary of the Reformation.

For most preachers, the most difficult challenge on this day is how to avoid giving yet another history lesson on why this day holds such importance on the Lutheran calendar.

The celebration of the 75th anniversary of this congregation makes that somewhat of a moot point.

The fact that you chose Reformation Sunday to celebrate your 75th anniversary is certainly appropriate, because it is a festival day where we celebrate and remember our history, both as a congregation and as Lutheran Christians.

You here at The Lutheran Church of the Covenant share a history and tradition that has been shaped by your 75 years together.

This day is a day to remember and celebrate the significant events of your past, many of which have been highlighted weekly in your Wednesday's Word electronic newsletter over the past few weeks.

It is a day to remember and extol the many vicars, pastors and deacons that have been your spiritual shepherds over the time you have been doing mission and ministry as a congregation.

The list can be found in the back pages of your worship bulletin for today.

And even though the history of the Lutheran Church of the Covenant goes back only 75 years, today is also a day to remember and rejoice for the lives of the saints who came long before to these shores from Germany on a boat remarkably similar to the one that hangs back in that southwest quadrant of our nave—the boat—the great conversation piece.

When I was here, every so often, in the afternoons, after everyone else had left, I would come up here to the sanctuary and sit and look up and gaze at that vessel and at the stained glass windows that tell in pictures, the history of the Christian church, and in particular, the final two on the south side, that focus on the Saxons and their journey to America.

I would let my mind wander and imagine what life must have been like for them, what kept them going on that journey across the unpredictable waters of the Atlantic Ocean, and what enabled them to persevere, despite the difficulties they would encounter once they arrived here.

I'm speculating, of course, but I will submit that they endured, they persisted, they persevered because their eyes were fixed on God.

I loved the first line of the paraphrase of Psalm 46 that we sang earlier, "*God is the refuge of the saints, when storms of sharp distress invade, ere we can offer our complaints, behold God present with aid.*"

It was that faith, that trust in God's promises, that they passed on to you, who over these 75 years, have given generously of your time, your talents, and your treasure.

And above all, this day is a day to remember and to give thanks that God sent God's son to earth to set us free from our captivity to sin, to shower us all with new life and fill us with God's love, to use the words that we stated in the thanksgiving for baptism that we recited at the start of our worship service.

And celebrating a church anniversary on the day we commemorate the Reformation presents us with a unique opportunity to reexamine our faith alongside our history.

The Reformation was not and is not a one-time event.

The Church is always reforming.

We as Christians are always reforming.

And when you have been together for so long, the tendency is to do things out of habit, giving little or no thought as to why.

So, it is at times like today; when we are all decked out in Reformation red and feeling good about who we are, and the mission and ministry we do; it is a good time to ask ourselves that question, “why are we here?”

We have to ask that question because our human tendency is to hang on to the past.

And as a church – made up of humans – we are no different.

Perhaps sometimes we are much worse.

We become captives to the past.

We tend to want to hang on to dreams that have long faded from memory.

Why? Because we don’t know what the future holds.

We rely on what we know because it gives us a sense of security. But, more often than not, what we know doesn’t always work anymore.

A celebration such as this, one that recalls 75 years, is a celebration that invites us, not only to look backward, but also to look forward and to determine how we live our lives from this moment on, both as individuals and as a worshipping community.

And that is where we turn to our Gospel for the assurance that we seek.

“If you continue in my word,” Jesus says, “you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free’?”

I am drawn to this reading for a couple of reasons.

The one should be obvious, it talks about Abraham – not me, of course, but it’s always fascinating to see one’s name in print.

But the other reason is that it reminds me of the scene in the movie, *A Few Good Men*, with Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson, in which Nicholson gets right up into Tom Cruise’s face and says: “The truth! You can’t handle the truth!”

And in a certain sense, these people couldn’t handle the truth.

“We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone,” they reply.

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

The Jewish people down through history had spent more time in captivity than they had spent as free people. They had been conquered and exiled by the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Persians, and every other surrounding nation.

Even at the time of this conversation they were under the dominance of Rome.

And yet here they were, claiming never to have been slaves to anyone.

At least one part of their statement was true – they were descendants of Abraham.

But claiming that heritage didn’t afford them any special privilege or any special freedoms; just like being Lutherans doesn’t offer us an exclusive ticket to heaven.

Hear again what Jesus said, "*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*"

If you continue in my Word. At the heart of being a follower of Jesus, is to continue to live in God's Word, the Bible.

It is worth noting on this Reformation Sunday that *this* is where Martin Luther began to find his freedom: in his immersion in the Bible.

Luther spent a great deal of time trying to know who God was, and to find ways of expressing what he came to know and believe, so that others would know God too.

Luther was a theological scholar, but when it came to connecting with the people, he used coarse language, drank beer, and wrote hymns using tunes people knew and recognized.

When he wrote his catechism, he used language his small son could understand.

He even translated the Bible into the language people spoke.

Truth about God and our faith, as complex as it is, should be something we ALL can grasp and wrestle with.

Today the church continues to live with that challenge: to live in a way that does not hide God's love and grace.

This is what it means to be Lutheran – that we believe and confess that those who wish to be saved, shall live, not by works, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

That we put our faith, not in ourselves, or what we do or don't do, in what we have accomplished or failed to accomplish – but *in the crucified and risen Jesus*.

The message of the Reformation is God's love for us.

It is a love that frees us and redefines us as people of God and as members of the whole body of Christ.

Not that other Christians aren't right there with us – but we continue to be Lutheran, that there might be, in the church catholic, at least one denomination, one community within the Body of Christ, that keeps bringing this up, persistently if need be, that the just live by faith; that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; that we are saved by grace, as a gift, through faith in Jesus, and not by human works, or accomplishments or obedience.

As a church, we are also called to speak and act for those who are struggling with hunger, homelessness, poverty, and injustice; as well as raise awareness on issues that affect the earth and its environment.

We are called to unceasingly *proclaim* this good news, and *live* this good news.

That's what you here at the Lutheran Church of the Covenant have done and continue to do well, alongside the Lutheran Church of the Master, with your collaborative support for the Southeast Clergy Hunger Center, The Southeast Clergy Meals on Wheels, and other works that witness to the Gospel.

You have endured, you have come through a lot of changes and successfully met a lot of challenges, not simply on the good things that we do as congregations, but on salvation by grace through faith.

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

It is God's word that compels us to view our experience of God's grace in the past as a springboard so that we view neither present nor future with fear but with expectation.

So, let us as Lutheran Christians, resolve to stand, here – on the Gospel.

Let us go forward and strengthen the Church, and our ministry, and our lives, on this good news. *Know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*

In the name of the Father, and (+) of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, **Amen**