

“Can We Handle the Truth?”

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

*“I want the truth!”*

*“You can’t handle the truth!”*

In the famous exchange from the movie *A Few Good Men*, an arrogant Marine Corps colonel treats the prosecuting attorney who is attempting to extract from the commanding officer information regarding the death of a soldier under his command with unbridled contempt. To this career officer, this naval lawyer had no right to challenge his authority because he had no concept of what a true military officer faces in safeguarding the security of the nation:

- “Son, we live in a world that has walls, and those walls have to be guarded by men with guns. Who’s gonna do it? You? You, Lt. Weinburg? I have a greater responsibility that you could possibly fathom ... my existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, saves lives. You don’t want the truth because deep down in places you don’t talk about at parties, you want me on that wall, you need me on that wall ... I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to a man who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the very freedom I provide, and then questions the manner in which I provide it. I would rather you just said thank you, and went on your way. Otherwise, I suggest you pick up a weapon, and stand a post. Either way, I don’t give a damn what you think you are entitled to.”

In the end, the prosecuting attorney does draw the truth out of this officer, only to discover that perhaps this truth was indeed more than he could handle.

The truth is something that all of us value. We teach our children the importance of being truthful and the consequences of lying and dishonesty. We value truth from our politicians, and as we vote this week we are looking for candidates who will be truthful and honest in the offices to which they are elected. We seek truth when we visit the doctor, when we seek out legal advice, and when we engage an accountant to assist us in our financial affairs. In the words of Winston Churchill, *“the truth is incontrovertible. Malice may attack it, ignorance, may deride it, but in the end, there it is.”*

But sometimes, the truth that we receive may be more than we can handle. Our children may share with us the truth about their lives and the struggles they are enduring – such as depression, drug dependency, failed marriages, being victimized by bullies – and it may be more than we can endure. Our elected officials may inform us that the state of our community is dire, and that reality is not the news we expected or wanted to hear. The truth our doctors might share with us – that we have cancer, or our loved ones are suffering from dementia, or that our friend will never be able to walk again – is too overwhelming. There are times when we truly cannot handle the truth.

On this Reformation Sunday, we Lutherans celebrate our heritage which centers on the truth that is proclaimed to us in the Word of God. We give thanks for the lives and witness of Martin Luther and his fellow reformers who sought to restore the foundational truth of the Christian faith that we are *“justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”* (Romans 3:28). We give thanks for Luther’s translation of the Bible into the language of the people, so that as on the day of Pentecost we can *“in our own languages ... hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”* (Acts 2:11). We lift our voices in celebration that *“God’s Word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever,”* as we commit ourselves anew that *“to spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor.”*

The truth that we value as Lutherans is rooted in Jesus’ teaching in our Gospel lesson for this Reformation Sunday. In this section of John’s Gospel, Jesus is teaching a group of *“Jews who had believed in him,”* people who valued God’s Word proclaimed through the law and prophets who recognized that now in their presence *“the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14). To these believers, Jesus issues a series of promises that all hinge on one crucial condition: *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”* (8:31-32). This condition is expressed in two distinctive terms found in John’s Gospel: *meno* (“continue in”) and *logos* (“word”).

Continuing in Jesus’ Word denotes a permanent relationship between Jesus’ followers and his Word; all that our Lord promises them depends on their continuing relationship to the Word of our Lord. For those who remain in a continuing relationship with this holy Word, Jesus offers three promises that are each built around one central word: truth (*aletheia*). The liberating power of Jesus’ truth is unknowable apart from being Jesus’ disciple, which in turn depends on one’s relationship to Jesus’ word. The truth and freedom that Jesus promises are not abstract principles, but like light and life are bound to the Word: *“in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”* (1:4-5). The truth is the presence of God in Jesus, and this truth *“will make you free.”*

The initial reaction of Jesus’ listeners is one of resistance, appealing to their heritage as *“descendants of Abraham,”* which guarantees their spiritual freedom so that they have no need of what Jesus offers – even though, in spite of claiming that they *“have never been slaves to anyone,”* they were once enslaved by the Egyptians and are presently enslaved by the Romans. Jesus responds by correcting their misunderstanding of freedom and slavery. Freedom is a gift, something that cannot be claimed by virtue of one’s heritage. One’s identity as slave or free is determined by what one does, not by who one claims to be: *“everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”* If, on the other hand, one recognizes the truth of Jesus’ identity, that he is the Son (*“it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”* 1:18) then freedom is possible:

- *“This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”* – John 6:40.

As we come together this morning, we gather in the presence of our Lord who we believe truly dwells among us *“full of grace and truth.”* Our Lutheran confessions teach us that Jesus *“was not a mere human being or angel. He was not only truthful, wise, and powerful. He is the eternal truth and Wisdom itself, and almighty God.”* (Formula of Concord: Solid

*Declaration*). We believe that the truth is present among us in Jesus Christ, and that by remaining steadfast in God's Holy Word we will continue to be blessed by the liberating presence of this truth.

*But can we handle this truth?*

While we place great value on telling and receiving the truth, there are times when the truth reveals painful realities about ourselves and others that we might not want to hear. The truth shines a light upon us and reveals our flaws, our imperfections, and our sins. The truth eliminates all doubt as to the reality of our lives and the areas in which we may not be living up to expectations – both ours and others. The truth pushes delusions off of the stage and shows us life as it really is – and sometimes that might be too difficult or too painful for us to handle.

For Luther, the truth of God's Word is revealed to us as both law and gospel. The law is the word that convinces us that we are "by nature sinful and unclean," that no matter who we may be or think we are that *"there is no distinction, since all have sinned and all short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:22-23). The law is the truth that shines a light upon us to reveal who we truly are, and convinces us that by our own efforts we cannot make ourselves right with God or reconcile ourselves with others.

- "The law of God demands a pure heart, perfect obedience, perfect fear and love of God. The law is not satisfied with outward fulfillment ... it reveals [human] sinfulness and increases it. It constantly accuses him and delivers him up to God's wrath, to judgment, and to eternal death. This is the law's power ... It intends to, and actually does, awaken men out of their unawareness, make them feel the power of the law, recognize their sin, experience God's wrath, and be led to repentance." – Paul Atlthaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*.

While the law reveals the truth about our own sinfulness, about the sin that separates us from God and one another, and about the dysfunction world in which we live that stands opposed to God's will for creation, its central purpose is to lead us to the greater truth: the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the word of grace that we are *"now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... for we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."* (Romans 3:24, 28).

- "The gospel' is the Reformation label for that promise which, if true at all, is unconditional: the promise made in the name of one who has already satisfied the condition of death and therefore has all the future in his gift ... The gospel tolerates no conditions. It is itself unconditional promise. And when it is rightly spoken, it takes the conditions we put on the value of our life as the very conditions of its promise." – Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings*.

The truth that reveals the reality of our flawed and sinful condition may be hard for us to handle, but it may be equally hard for us to handle the truth of God's unconditional love, that *"there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and there is nothing I can do to make God love me less."* (Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*). We may be tempted to avert our eyes to both truths: the reality of our flaws and imperfections, as well as the

reality that God loves us and everyone in spite of these flaws and imperfections. We may try to mitigate both truths, but when we overcome that which draws us away from the reality that God's Word reveals to us and place ourselves in God's loving care, we will discover that while the truth may at first be hard to handle, it will be that force that will set us free from anything that is preventing us from living the abundant life that God desires for all of God's children.

- "I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is 'the God of all grace,' in the apostle Peter's words. And grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God's family." – Yancey.

### *Can we handle the truth?*

It may be hard to look at ourselves in the manner in which the truth reveals us to be, but when God's truth reveals the reality of our condition it is always for the sake of repentance, restoration, and renewal. When we confess the truth of our sinfulness before the God of all grace, we do so in full confidence that God will forgive our sins, remove the obstacles that we have placed in our path, and give us the ability to walk in newness of life. The truth invites us into an abiding relationship with the Word that dwells with us in Jesus Christ, and this is the truth that will really set us free.

Amen.