

“True Disciples”

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

A recent trip back from the States was going as usual as we pulled up to the Canada Customs booth at the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge and handed the border agent our passports. He asked the usual questions, such as where do we live, how long have we been away from Canada, and the approximate value of the goods we are bringing back with us. Then something unexpected happened: after a brief pause, he asked me, “Are you some kind of an announcer?” As Susan began laughing hysterically, I replied that I am not an announcer but a Lutheran pastor. As he returned our passports, he replied, “Well, you sure have the voice for it!” To say the least, the rest of the drive home was very interesting!

That border agent was not the first person who has commented on my voice and noted that I have the perfect voice for radio or commercials (at least no one has told me that I have a face that is ideal for radio!). While I have never seriously considered such a career move, I have from time-to-time imitated radio disc jockeys from my childhood and other advertising spokespersons that one can hear on radio and television. The ones that I have often found fascinating are those who are featured in “infomercials” plugging all sorts of products that they promise will revolutionize one’s life. Their rapid pitches, high levels of enthusiasm, and appeal to the desire to make one’s daily life easier are meant to inspire a person to pick up the phone or go online and order their product. The pitch that I find particularly interesting is when they speak to the urgency of the moment of how important it is to “act now!” This will often include a bonus for quick action, usually in the form of a promise that “we will double our offer; all you have to do is pay shipping and handling.” Of course, they never tell you how much that “shipping and handling” will cost, but this pitch must work because advertisers have been using this appeal to urgency for decades.

Such sales appeals are not, of course, a part of Jesus’ ministry, but there is an aspect of urgency in his address to his audience in today’s Gospel lesson. Our lesson begins with Mark’s report that *“Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him”* (Mark 8:31). It is significant to note that the Evangelist refers to Jesus’ audience as people who *had* believed in him, former followers who for some reason had drifted away

(their presence brings to mind Jesus' Parable of the Sower, where Jesus describes the seed of his Word falling on rocky ground and among thorns, where it is scorched by the sun and chocked by the weeds – Mark 4:1-9). Even though their belief in Jesus is described in the past tense, our Lord continues to teach them that “*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). Jesus teaches this audience whose faith in him may have waned about genuine disciples and invites them to go deeper in faith. True disciples of Jesus faithfully receive Jesus' word, embrace it, and allow it to transform their lives. Those who do so “*will know the truth*”; to receive Jesus' revelatory word is to know the truth because Jesus, as God's Word, is himself the truth: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” (John 14:6). Those who receive the truth revealed in Jesus and let it to take root and mature in them will be set free. Human freedom follows from and presupposes knowledge of the truth: “*In order to be truly free, a person must first know what is true.*”

The way Jesus structures his statement to this audience of former believers is interesting. It begins with an “if” clause followed by three *apodoses*, ‘*a clause expressing the consequence in a conditional sentence.*’ (Dictionary.com). The condition is expressed with two distinctive Johannine terms: *meno* (“continue in”) and *logos* (“word”). The centrality of Jesus' Word has been highlighted throughout the Fourth Gospel:

- “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” – 6:68.
- “Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never taste \death.” – 8:51.

Meno denotes a permanent relationship between Jesus' listeners and his Word (“*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.*” – 15:10). All that Jesus promises depends on the listeners' continuing relationship to Jesus' word. These three promises are each built around “truth” (*aletheia*) and are inexplicably intertwined. The liberating power of the truth is unknowable apart from being Jesus' disciples, which in turn depends on one's relationship to Jesus' words. The truth and freedom that Jesus promises are not abstract principles, but like life and light are bound to the Word:

- “What has come into being 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 … The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” – 1:4-5, 9.

- “Again Jesus said to them, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” – 8:12.

The truth is the presence of God in Jesus; this truth is the source of “freedom” (*eleuthero*). Jesus’ reinterpretation of freedom evokes resistance from his listeners, who respond that “*we are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’*” (8:33). They believe that their descent from Abraham already guarantees their spiritual freedom, so they have no need for what Jesus offers. “*Descendants of Abraham*” was an established title for Israel as the covenant people of God. Their claim that they “*have never been slaves to anyone*” seems to forget their years of enslavement in Egypt and Babylon and their current occupation by Rome. One a deeper level, it expresses a lack of awareness of their spiritual enslavement to the power of sin and consequent need for the freedom that Jesus offers. “*In their desire to distance themselves from Jesus, they have already begun the process of distancing themselves from their own history*” (Gail O’Day).

Jesus responds by addressing the two prongs of his audience’s protest: freedom and their descent from Abraham. His use of the phrase “*very truly, I tell you*” marks the beginning of a new teaching: “*Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin.*” (8:34). Freedom is a gift; one cannot lay claim to freedom 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. At the heart of sinful actions is the willful rejection of God, and the rejection of God separates a person from him. The resulting state of separation that is a “state of sin” is aptly characterized as slavery, because people are powerless to free themselves from it and reconcile themselves to God.

Jesus shares a short parable that illustrates the relationship among status, inheritance, and freedom: “*The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever*” (8:35). The images of son and slave recall the stories of Ishmael and Isaac in Genesis and the struggle over inheritance:

- “For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of a slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise … So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.” – Galatians 4:22-23, 31.

The use of “forever” points to the eschatological dimension of freedom and links the promise of freedom with the other eschatological gifts Jesus promises his followers:

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (6:35).

Jesus ends his teaching by repeating the promise of freedom from earlier, substituting “Son” for “truth”: *“So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed”* (8:36). Jesus makes explicit the link between the truth and Jesus’ identity. If one recognizes the truth of Jesus’ identity, that he is the Son, then freedom is possible:

- “No one has every seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” – 1:18.
- “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.” – 3:16.
- “I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.” – 8:38.

True freedom follows upon receiving the truth that Jesus reveals. As the Son remains eternally with the Father, Jesus can free all people enslaved to sin, who as slaves cannot free themselves.

It is significant that today’s Gospel lesson is heard on this Reformation Sunday, the day in which we celebrate our Lutheran heritage and the centrality of the Word of God in our lives. This day marks Martin Luther’s posting of the Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in his desire to begin a scholarly conversation on the practice of selling indulgences that promised freedom from sin and the torments of purgatory. It began a series of events that would lead to Luther’s excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church and the establishment of a movement that would eventually be known as the Lutheran Church. As important as it is for us to remember our heritage and the founding of our tradition, what is of lasting importance on this day is Luther’s emphasis on the Word of God as the source of our freedom, that it is in the Word made flesh that we are freed from all forces that would enslave us so that we might walk anew as children of the light:

- “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, previous blood and his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may believe in him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness,

just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true.” – *Small Catechism*.

It was his insistence on the centrality of the Word of God that was at the center of his defense at the Diet of Worms in 1521, in which all the political and religious forces of his day challenged Luther to recant his writings. After asking for a day to consider their demands, Luther returned and replied that “*unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason ... my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.*” After leaving the diet, Luther is kidnapped by friends who hide him in Wartburg Castle from enemies who desire to kill him. While at Wartburg, Luther begins that task of translating the Bible into German, the language of the people, so that as on the first day of Pentecost all people might “*in our own languages ... hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.*” (Acts 2:11). Luther’s translation opened the Word of God to all people, so that Jesus’ promise might also be one that we may hear as well: that if we continue in this Word of life that is ours in the good news of Jesus Christ, then we will truly be his disciples, will know the truth, and will be free. As God’s Word is “*a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path*” (Psalm 119:105), so do we give thanks for the gift of the Word of God that is at the center of our lives together in this and all generations as Lutheran Christians.

- “The soul can live without all things except the Word of God; without the Word of God nothing can help us. But when we have the Word we need nothing else, for in the Word we have enough food, joy, peace, light, art, justice, truth, wisdom, and all good things in abundance.” – *On the Freedom of a Christian*.

Our celebration of Reformation Sunday also calls us to center our lives on the Word of God, to take advantage of Jesus’ offer to abide in his Word, to place the Word of God at the center of our lives both individually and as a church. It is in this way that we become true disciples, which according to Raymond Brown means that “*we hear the Word of God and endeavor to live in obedience to it.*” True disciples know that only the Word of God that is ours in Jesus Christ is the word of eternal life, the source and norm of our faith and life, and the truth that sets us free from all that would seek to separate us from God’s love and enslave us to forces of doubt and darkness. It is not by accident that when we affirm our baptismal promises that we renounce all forces that would seek to separate us from God and enslave us to powers that seek to deny the freedom that is ours in the Word that is Jesus Christ: “*Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God ... the powers of this world that rebel*

against God ... the ways of sin that draw you from God?" (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). When we promise to "hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper," we acknowledge that the offer of light and life through abiding in God's Word is the only way in which we will truly live and walk in freedom as children of the light.

- "Although faith is an act of man which is oriented to the word of promise, it is not an act which he either should or can produce by himself; rather God creates it through the word. God the Holy Spirit works faith in a man through the preaching of the word. 'Faith ... comes only through God's word or gospel.' Luther thereby makes two points. First, it is not I but the word who works faith: in the word I experience the working of the Spirit. Second, no other authority except the word of God can provide the basis for my faith." – Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*.

As we were driving home following that memorable encounter on our return to Canada, I thought about the border agent's question and how I might have replied if I had a moment to think about it. Yes, I am an announcer; but my announcing is not to urge people to "call now" to take advantage of a limited time offer. Yes, there is an urgency for us to heed Jesus' call to abide in his word so that as true disciples we will know the truth that makes us free; but rather than this being an offer that will expire at midnight it is an invitation to live in the fullness that our Lord desires for all of us every day. It is a call that echoes Paul's words to the Corinthians to see that "*now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!*" (2 Corinthians 6:2). It is an invitation for us here and now to live in the freedom that is ours in the Word of life that is Jesus Christ, even as we look forward to that day when our Lord and Saviour will lead us to our eternal home where as "*surely as goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life ... I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*" (Psalm 23:6).

God's offer of light and life are available right now! Abide in God's Word so that you may be true disciples who will know this liberating truth that is ours in Jesus Christ! Don't wait – act now!

Amen.