

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Reformation Day - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalms 46

Romans 3:19-28

John 8:31-36

10/27/2024

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

31 Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." 33 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'?" 34 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

The Gospel of Our Lord

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

### **Reformation Day**

Good morning! "If you don't use it, you lose it," Dr. Peterson informed us the first day of Greek. Regardless of how proficient in biblical Greek we were when we left seminary, if we didn't use that skill, it would fade. As was often the case, Dr. Peterson was correct. This is especially true

for those of us who struggled in that class. I can still read the words, I can still navigate the appropriate scholarly and academic texts, but whatever I had has disappeared. It's hard to believe that a world that encompassed our lives so completely, to the point that some students in summer Greek had DREAMS in the language, are now "just fingerprints on an abandoned handrail."

Our text today shows us that just like the need to use and practice the Greek I once had, our faith is also a place that requires work and diligence. Jesus says; *"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."* We are reminded that this faith thing requires effort and work.

Our Gospel text starts off with an easy to overlook detail: *"31 Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him..."* He is speaking to a group of fellow Jews that have apparently believed in him at one time, but for some reason have stopped. It's a reminder that even in his own time believers could drift away. Sound familiar? At a time when it feels like people have left the church, our lesson today reminds us that remaining in God's word takes diligence.

It's a lesson Martin Luther learned 500 years ago too. That's right, it's Reformation Sunday! (Well, technically the 31st is Reformation Day, but we observe it the Sunday before.) Most people are wearing red and the colors on our paraments have all changed. The church associates the work of the Holy Spirit with the color red, and so today is one of only two regularly scheduled times of the year that we break out the color, Reformation Day, and Pentecost. Red is the color of God's exciting new activity, and so it fits that we see it now. You will also see it worn at the ordination of a new deacon or pastor.

But, if you're new to this Lutheran thing, or in case you need a refresher, here's a little history. In the 1500's the Catholic faith was pretty much the only show in town throughout most of Europe. In the east there was the Orthodox faith, but most of western Europe was Catholic. The church ran everything, governments answered to Rome and life revolved around the papacy. Like a lot of institutions, for some people it became about keeping that system in power, and so focus shifted from God's work in the world to more earthly concerns.

The pope at the time was a little short on cash, which wasn't a good thing since this little building project was happening in Rome: St. Peter's Basilica, maybe you've heard of it? So a fundraising campaign was started. But it got a little out of hand, because they started selling these things called indulgences. They were a piece of paper that guaranteed a person's soul would fast-track out of purgatory and into heaven upon their death. But as the late-great Billy Mays would say, "wait, there's more!" What about your dead loved one?! You don't want them to suffer in purgatory, do you?! Well just buy another indulgence and they'll be safe too! One popular salesman Johann Tetzel famously said "as soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs!"

Well, as you can imagine, this didn't sit well with a lot of other Catholic leaders who felt that the church had gone astray. And so on one fateful day in 1517 a professor in Wittenberg Germany named Martin Luther posted 95 theses on the church door to invite other scholars to discuss the ways that he felt the church had misunderstood a few things.

But what Luther didn't expect was the reaction from the local community. This new fangled invention called the printing press picked up what he wrote and it spread like wildfire. Now, while this is an

oversimplification, we consider this the start of what we call the Reformation. Luther, like a lot of other Catholics, felt that the church, to use the language from our Gospel text today, had failed to continue in God's word. Luther called people back to the core of the biblical message, and he found that in the truth that sin separates us from God. We can do nothing to bridge that gap, no power of our own is strong enough to make up for it. A lifetime of good deeds won't cut it, and buying an indulgence certainly won't either. But there was good news! Reading the book of Romans from St. Paul, Luther realized that we are justified by faith, not by works. It was God's wonderful gift of grace that secures eternal life for us, not our own actions.

It is God's action that saves us, not our own. I spoke of God's action at the beginning of our service, saying that *"by water and your Word you claim us as children, making us heirs of your promise and servants of all... we praise you for the gift of new life in Jesus Christ."*<sup>1</sup>

Reformation Day is a mix of emotions for me. I give thanks for the Holy Spirit's activity throughout all of time, but it's also a reminder that human sin has split the whole church. It's a reminder that like our Gospel lesson, like the Jews that once believed, like the church in the 1500's, we too can stray away. Yes, God's grace is always offered to us, but like standing under a street lamp at night, we can walk into the dark whenever we choose.

But have faith. God is at work in you to do amazing things! This is my last Reformation Day at St. Paul's, but I leave knowing that the Holy Spirit is still hard at work here at this congregation. And that sounds like good news to me. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> ELW, Thanksgiving For Baptism