

Title: “It is Luther’s Fault”

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John 8:31-32

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Service Readings: Rev 14:6-7, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” We explore this through the lens of the Reformation.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Things were going pretty well 500 years ago. There was one Christian church, one message, and one truth – at least from Rome’s perspective. Sure, there were people who didn’t completely buy into that doctrine and so gathered together in hopes of influencing change in the papal office, but those groups remained little more than a mosquito bite on the arm of the pope and were easily swatted before they became anything more than a nuisance. These groups may have grumbled, may have even felt aggrieved, but one thing they didn’t feel was confidence to stand up to one of the most powerful political structures of the known world. That is, until Luther came along. His hammer and nail instilled in them the boldness that they lacked in all their efforts. Luther may have simply desired that the church reform its doctrine, but instead he forged a path and then paved the way for these groups to splinter from the church and author their own doctrines.

Every year during this time we look at the impact that Luther had on freeing the gospel message from the grip of the Catholic church, but we rarely consider the consequences that his efforts had that continue to ripple throughout time, and are even felt today. To be clear, I’m not standing here this morning and proffering that he made a mistake in his actions, that he should have left his hammer at the monastery. Not at all. What he did had to be done. What he did set free a message that had been held captive for many years. But what he did also complicated life for us today.

Now, before we get much farther, we need to look at the gospel passage from because it provides the foundation for this message. The verses we read are part of a much larger conversation that Jesus is having with the Jewish leaders. He is teaching them that he is the truth, the light, and the one sent by the father to bring freedom from sin. We then get to our passage:

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ³³ They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

“The truth will set you free,” Jesus says. As Pilate once asked, “What is truth?” You see, 500 years ago, there was one truth and it was dictated by the Catholic church. But because of Luther, that truth was challenged: there were now two. And just as quickly that number grew. And as the years progressed, there were more, and more, and more. Today there are more than 40 documented denominations, or 20,000 if you count independent church organizations. Either way, the number is greater than one, and either way the question still needs to be answered: what *is this truth* that will set us free? Every Christian denomination will agree that truth is defined by Jesus but every Christian denomination seems to have interpreted it in a different way. And because this freedom of interpreting this truth sprang from Luther’s reformation, it is only fitting that it become a topic on this Reformation Sunday.

The truth that Jesus talks about in this passage is nothing less than the gospel. It is nothing less than the message that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” It sounds so simple, so straight forward. How can this message be misinterpreted? We can come up with a long list of reasons, but at the very center of them all lies sin. It is through this corrupted lens that we see the world, see Jesus, and see the salvation that he has won for us. It is through our own sinful eyes that we hear this message and believe that it *must* be more complicated, that it *must* require our own contribution. Or, even worse, we suppress this message of freedom from the ears and heavy hearts of the afflicted so we can exert our power and influence over them. Or, maybe we simply don’t understand what Jesus meant and would rather interpret it ourselves than seek clarity from him. However it happens, it happens. The message of freedom, the message of Jesus Christ, the gospel itself, is watered down, distorted, misinterpreted, and used for sinful gain. And if *that* is the version of the gospel that a person hears, can they really be set free? Or will their hearts still suffer the guilt of sins they believe to be unforgivable?

Luther opened this door because he wanted to correct the teaching of the church. He wanted the pure gospel proclaimed, the true gospel proclaimed. He wanted the truth to go out into the world. He got what he wanted, but he got a whole lot more. And so we come back to our earlier point: the impact that his actions have on us today.

We look out into the world and we see the gospel message proclaimed in many variations. Some serve to exclude, and some serve to include. There are gospel messages that preach salvific partnership with Jesus, himself. They are messages of cooperation and coordination: “I say this. Jesus does that.” There are also gospel messages that preach subordination between Jesus and ourselves: “We do enough good, pray to enough saints, ask his mother to mediate, and eventually Jesus is persuaded to welcome us into heaven.” There are even gospel messages that have removed the gospel message completely! They teach that we should build in ourselves enough faith, tell Jesus what we want, and he the fulfills our wishes. “Eternal life? What’s the value in that? We have cars we want, bills we need paid. We can talk salvation some other time.”

So where am I going with all this? I know that, of all Sunday mornings, I’ve given Luther a bad rap so let me redeem myself. What Luther did 500 years ago is a call to action for what we must do today. We must protect the truth. We must protect the gospel message. Luther had the courage to take a

stand when the truth was not being proclaimed. Do we? If he were alive today, would he find a hammer and nail in your hands?

The gospel message is what we've got and it is all we need. It is all the *world* needs. And it is *something that* the world needs. They don't need a watered down version. They don't need a version that keeps them chained to guilt. They need the truth. They need to be set free. And the only way that they will be set free is if they know the truth – the real truth – the one from Jesus, himself. Jesus took the punishment for their sins. He died for them. He conquered death for them. He has done it all for them. This is the truth, the real truth that the world needs to hear. It is the truth that we need to protect.

This is a truth that is a matter of life and death. Not earthly life and death. Eternal life and eternal death. This is a truth so important that we must not allow a false truth, a different gospel, to reach their ears. And if that happens, we must fight it with our lives. We must not allow any distorted gospel, any contorted man-made truth to drown out the one from God. And what is this truth? As Paul once wrote:

² It is this Good News that saves you if you continue to believe the message I told you—unless, of course, you believed something that was never true in the first place.

³ I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. ⁴ He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said.

It is a message that is nothing less than what Jesus has done for us and it is nothing more than what Jesus has done for us. It is a message that finds its completeness in the work of Jesus Christ. Crucified. Died. Buried. Resurrected. There is no room for us to add anything to it. We can receive the benefits of this message but we can't contribute to it.

And so, on this day when we remember the Reformation, let us remember what Luther did – he set the truth free from where it was held captive. But now that it is free it is being distorted. It is up to us to protect it. It is up to fight for it. It is up to us to stand up for it. It is up to us to never, ever back down. The hammer has been entrusted to us. What will we do with it?

Please pray with me.

Martin Luther set in motion a movement that freed the true gospel message into the world. Today, that message is being manipulated for the sinful desires of the world. Lord, we stand today ready and willing to protect it, to proclaim it to all the world. Guard us as we guard your message of salvation throughout the world.

Amen.