

Sermon for Reformation Sunday, 2010
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Manhattan
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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

It is a joy to be with you here today to preach the Word. I want to thank Pr. Fryer for the invitation to preach on this Reformation Sunday. I think it is not an accident that I should be preaching on *this* particular Sunday, Reformation Sunday. Today we commemorate this day in 1517, Halloween, or All Hallows' Eve, when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther was at the time professor of theology, and particularly of Old Testament, at the university in Wittenberg. I am an assistant professor of theology at Fordham University here in New York City, where I teach in the field of New Testament. (Even though I'm a Lutheran, somehow the Jesuits up at Fordham let me in!) So, like many Lutheran theologians who teach in the area of biblical studies, I suppose I feel a certain kinship to old Luther.

We commemorate Luther's posting of the 95 theses on this day, because that event is often thought of as the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation. In fact, for Luther himself the Reformation began much earlier than 1517. In the 95 theses Luther protested what he saw as the abuse in the selling of indulgences in the Roman Catholic Church of his day; but Luther's protest was based on his already years-long study of Scripture, the Word of God. He believed that the selling of indulgences was making a sham out of Jesus' call to repentance in the gospels. The theory and practice of indulgences grew out of the penitential system of the medieval Catholic Church. In that system, after a person had confessed his or her sins, and after he or she had been absolved of those sins by the priest, the penitent was required to make satisfaction for sin. Making satisfaction meant that through various penitential acts a person makes up for the consequences of one's sin, consequences that are destructive to oneself or to others. If one did not make total satisfaction for one's sins in this life, one would make them up in purgatory. But the idea behind indulgences was that, within the body of Christ, in which we are all joined both to one another and to Christ, we can aid each other in our penitential struggle. Not only can the living aid each other, such as through prayer, but the living can even aid the dead in purgatory.

The point of an indulgence was that through various penitential acts one could mitigate suffering in purgatory for oneself or for a loved one.

It's a bit unfair when Lutherans caricature indulgences—which still exist in Catholicism—as a way of purchasing salvation. Indulgences are really much more complex than that. But it is true that at the time of Luther the sale of indulgences had gotten so far out of control that people were being taught that indulgences could be effective even without sorrow for their sins or confession of their sins. Luther's problem with indulgences was that they made a sham out of true repentance. True repentance is to come to hate your sins and to turn from them and to seek God's mercy. But instead of leading people to hate their sins and to turn from them, the indulgences were simply leading people to fear punishment, to fear purgatory, and to try to find any way to avoid it. Luther came to his criticism of indulgences through his study of God's Word. The first and perhaps most famous of his 95 theses reads: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Luther refers to the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus' first words include the command, "Repent, and believe the gospel." To repent, or to do penance, is not about fearing punishment, but about hating our sin and turning from it. To repent is, in fact, nothing other than simply to be honest before God, to acknowledge our sins and to ask for God's forgiveness. But that gospel truth was being obscured in Luther's day.

So the Lutheran Reformation is all about God's Word. It is a call to acknowledge God's Word as the highest authority in the church. It is a call to honor God's Word as the most precious thing we have. And this call to cherish God's Word as our highest possession is as urgent today as it has ever been. The shocking scandals in the Roman Catholic Church in recent years show how much this call to honor God's Word as the highest authority in the church is still needed. And yet, before casting stones at our Catholic brothers and sisters, we Lutherans need to look at ourselves; for alas, even our own Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has in recent years been succumbing to the temptation to replace God's Word as the highest authority in the church with our own ideas. We all need to be called back to God's Word.

Today Jesus does call us to love his Word, to cherish his Word, to abide in his Word. "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Let these words of Jesus be our prayer today, that we continue in God's Word. As we sing in that great Lutheran hymn, "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word."

Jesus invites us, through his Word, to truth and freedom. These are big and heady words: Truth and Freedom. What do they mean?

Truth has fallen on hard times. Many people don't believe in truth any more. Many prominent intellectuals today doubt that there is something called Truth, or that we could ever know it. Oh sure, I suppose physicists and chemists and biologists would still say that there are physical and chemical and biological truths. But that a book called Holy Scripture could be true, true for everyone of all times and all places—many simply laugh at the idea. That there could be true knowledge about God and false knowledge about God—well, that's simply preposterous! That there could be a true way of being human, and false ways of being human—well, that is completely absurd!

In two days we have our mid-term elections. It seems that in our political culture also there is disdain for truth. Lust for power has replaced love for truth. Holding onto a Senate seat or a House seat is more important than speaking the truth or doing the right thing. Here the words of the prophet Isaiah hold true, who in the 59th chapter described the political situation in his day: "Truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled." Is it any different today? Many a leader—not all leaders, but many a leader—turns away from the commitment to truth, because to speak the truth might cost something. How much easier it is to deny truth, or to pretend like there is no truth!

But Jesus says: There is truth, and I am it! He makes a bold claim: If you continue in *my* Word, you *will* know the truth, and the truth *will* make you free. Or as he says elsewhere: *I am* the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. What is he talking about? Truth about physics or chemistry or biology or mathematics? No, of course not. He is speaking of the truth about God, and the truth about us. Everything we need to know about God and about ourselves, Jesus shows us. Everything we need to know for faith and life, Jesus gives us.

And what kind of freedom is he talking about? It is freedom from sin and from death. Jesus says: "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the son continues for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Jesus, the Son of God, sets us free from sin and opens up for us the way to eternal life. Jesus frees us from sin and makes to be sons and daughters of God, so that we become his

brothers and sisters, and we get to inherit with him everything that he inherits, including eternal life.

A few years ago I read something written by the late Pope John Paul II, and it has remained with me. In discussing the problem of truth—that is, why so many people today doubt truth or are suspicious of it—he wrote the following: “People...run from truth as soon as they glimpse it, because they are afraid of its demands.” I think he’s right. When people deny the truth, it’s not necessarily because they do not believe in it, or because they are mendacious, but because they’re afraid of it. At the heart of the denial of truth is fear. The truth scares us.

Who has not known the fear of hearing the results of a medical test, fear of the truth?

Or perhaps you have known the fear of opening a letter from your employer or a letter in response to an application. Am I going to be fired from my job? Has my application been rejected? It is a moment of truth, a moment of fear.

There are people who, having found true love, flee from love, because they’re afraid of the commitment that such love requires and demands.

Many politicians flee from the truth; for to acknowledge the truth might require them to act courageously. It might cost them something. How much easier it is to ignore the truth, or just to do what will make you popular.

It’s not really different in our spiritual lives. Many people today reject religious truth. Some say that it’s because they don’t believe in religious truths. But underlying that doubt is often a deeper fear, the fear of commitment. How much easier it is just to float along in life, try out this or that, never make a commitment. We flee from truth, because we are afraid of its demands. After all, if Jesus really is my Lord and Lord of the universe, then to follow him requires that I be prepared to give him everything, including my life. And that’s scary. Did not Jesus himself say: “If anyone would follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Whoever would save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it.” When Jesus calls us to give our lives to him and for him, he calls upon us to love truth, and to be willing to die for it. Will you do that?

Perhaps more than anything else it is death that scares us. Have you ever asked yourself how much the fear of death drives your life? We’re haunted by our own finitude: the knowledge that someday we will have to depart this life. And so the questions nag us: What if I don’t get everything I want? What if I don’t accomplish everything that I’ve planned? In the end, what

will be the value of my life, really? Perhaps deep down we're afraid that this life might really be all that there is. But it is this fear of truth that is at the heart of what ails us.

If we look back to the beginning of the biblical story, we find that this is the way it's always been. Why did Adam and Eve eat from the tree that God had forbidden them? It's because they were afraid of the truth. The truth was that God was God and that they were not. They were afraid of their own finitude. And so they lusted for what was not theirs. They turned away from God and towards themselves. They broke their relationship with God. In short, they sinned. And then, when they had sinned, they were trapped. They were trapped by fear of the truth still: they were trapped by their fear of the truth that they were sinners and that God would punish them. So they hid themselves. They tried to hide the truth about themselves from God. And they tried to justify themselves before God. Adam says: My wife made me do it. And Eve says: The serpent made me do it. That's right: blame someone else for your sins.

It's no different with us. Again and again we turn away from God and turn towards ourselves. We stuff our lives with all kinds of things that are not God, things that are idols, really. For some people it may be obsession with sex, for others drugs or alcohol, for others it may be addiction to work, for others material possessions. But the more we stuff our lives with these idols, the more we close ourselves off to God, who is the source of life. And that is to choose sin and death. Sometimes our idols may be more subtle, but they can be every bit as destructive, such as the lust for fame or recognition, or making the value of our lives depend on what other people think of us. But once we start down this road, we become trapped, imprisoned by the power of our own sins, by the power of our own false choices, which close us down to God and to others.

Jesus Christ is the truth that frees us from all of this. Christ offers us truth and freedom. And this truth and freedom requires only that we be honest before God, that we confess our own fallenness before God and ask for his mercy. For, as Luther would say, what Christ wills for us is not that we should fear punishment, but that we should hate our sins and turn from them. Christ gives us the courage to embrace the truth, the truth about ourselves, to finally be honest before God without fear. Paul captures this well when he writes in those famous words in Romans that we heard today: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." You see, Christ Jesus allows me to say: The value of my life lies neither in my accomplishments nor in my lack of them. My

worthiness or unworthiness lies neither in my goodness nor in my sins. My worthiness lies in the fact that Christ died for me.

Once we have embraced this one great truth, our lives are opened to God and to truth in all of its dimensions. Our lives begin to make sense. Our priorities fall into the right order. We are freed from the need to justify ourselves before God or before others. We are free from the need to fill our lives with things that are not of God. There is no longer any truth that we need to fear, not the truth about ourselves, not even the truth of our own mortality, for Christ has opened up for us eternal life. We don't have to flee from the truth in Christ; we can embrace it.

Jesus says, If you continue in my Word, you will know the truth. It was one of Luther's great insights that all of Holy Scripture points to Jesus Christ. All of Holy Scripture testifies to the truth that Jesus Christ is. On this Reformation Sunday, let us renew our commitment to Holy Scripture and our love for Holy Scripture, all of it. Let us read Holy Scripture and ponder it. When we read Scripture, all of it from beginning to end, in the light of Christ, then we do have all the truth that we need for faith and life. This is what Luther and the later Lutheran theologians called the "sufficiency of Scripture." Everything that we need to make us wise unto salvation, and everything that we need to live a God-pleasing life, Scripture teaches. Scripture tells us everything we need to know about who God is. And it tells us who we are, who we are meant to be, who we can be, and who we will be. That is Christ's gift of truth to us. Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word. Amen.