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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/25/2015, Reformation Sunday
From Sermons by Martin Luther on John 8:31-36

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Pastor Fryer's introduction: Starting in September of 1531, Luther preached twelve sermons on John 8. He preached three sermons on our particular verses, John 8:31-36. He lifts up three main themes: First, he emphasizes that we should continue as disciples of Christ — not just begin to be disciples, but continue as Christ's disciples: "If you continue in my word, [Jesus says] you are truly my disciples..." Second, he preaches that if we would be Christians, then we must forsake sin. It is to be our daily work. As Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin." Luther's third great theme concerns Jesus Christ as the source of continuing as Christ's disciples and our ability to forsake sin. Here Luther becomes rather childlike. He refers to himself as "an old fool," and says that he strives to have the faith of child in Jesus.

So, the words of this sermon come from Martin Luther. I have not included all three of his sermons, or even the entirety of any one of the three, for Luther's sermons are long and head off in various directions. So I have not included the entirety of any one of his wonderful sermons, but I have focused on his passages about these three great themes: continuing as a disciple of Christ, turning away from sin, and Christ as the source of a holy life for us.

We begin Luther's sermon with this text:]

³¹Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in Him: If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples, ³²and you will know the truth. (John 8:31-32, RSV)

It is a disappointing price that Christ asks of those who were beginning to believe in Him and were saying: "We will remain loyal to You even at the risk of life and limb." Christ looks askance at them and says: "Yes indeed, if your faith in Me were only genuine and sincere! ... For I have two types of disciples. The one group believes in Me; they praise and hear the Gospel and say: 'This is the real truth.' I regard them as great and fine Christians. It is all a matter of continuing. Then there are others who hear it; but when the battle grows hot, they declare: 'Upon my soul, should I forsake this or that for the sake of the Gospel?' There are few who remain true to the Gospel in the face of cross and persecution. Where can one find those who are constant? Therefore I say that if you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples. If My doctrine pleases you, you are well schooled and know everything. And if you persevere in the doctrine through cross and suffering,

then you are My disciples. But My doctrine demands more than just an initial acceptance and much praise. I know that it is easy to believe in the beginning. But where are those who remain steadfast, who persevere, endure, and say: ‘Let come whatever God send me! If I am not to be well, then I am satisfied to be sick. If I am not to be rich, then I shall be content to remain poor. Whether I live or die, I shall remain with Christ?’”

People would gladly believe in Christ if this could make them lords or confer kingdoms on them. But if it involves suffering, they will have no part of it, and faith is finished... Fidelity to Christ’s doctrine is rare, especially when people encounter an evil wind. To be sure, many become Christians and hold firmly to the Gospel at first; but then they abandon it... This is reflected by the parable in the Gospel about the seed that fell on a rock. When the sun beat down upon it, it withered away (Luke 8:6). But those who stick to the Gospel are the true disciples. The others are false Christians and false brethren.

...Christ says here: “If you continue in My Word, etc.” ...The scene before us here resembles the spring, when all the branches are covered with blossoms. Then we wonder what to do with all the apples and pears we will harvest. But if rain or a wind hits the blossoms, they drop to the ground in profusion. About nine tenths of the blossoms are lost; barely one tenth of them matures into fruit, and some of this may be worm-eaten.

This also happens to the Gospel. At first everybody listens to it; it sounds precious, and it has many disciples. But if things go contrary to man’s wishes, if we do not preach what the people would like to hear, then they say: “All our misfortune is due to the Gospel.” Therefore the Lord Christ declares: “You are My disciples, but at the same time you are knaves. Only if you continue in My Word are you truly My disciples. It is not sufficient to begin to believe; no, it is necessary to continue and to persevere in adherence to the Word.” I, too, would like to be a Christian and accept the Gospel if it were not for the danger attending it, if one could enjoy only good days with it; for hatred, envy, contempt, and ingratitude are not to everyone’s liking. That is why the devil and everybody else act in opposition as soon as a person wants to become this Man’s disciple. Hold fast at such a time. Stand fast. Do not flee. Do not retreat. If you have begun to believe, persevere in it. There are many who endure, shed their blood, and boldly venture and dare. Such steadfast people are the true disciples.

...The Jews, too, would have welcomed the Gospel...if it had meant freedom from the cross, a free and comfortable life at home, exemption from taxes, and subservience to no one. If the Gospel were such a doctrine, I would be able to convert the whole world in one hour. If Christ had given everyone a sack filled with gold coins, plus a castle or a city—who would have deserted Him then? If He had given everyone a thousand guldens, or even only one gulden, with a guarantee to be able to spend it in peace, all the people would have flocked to Him. If He had given them freedom for fornication and adultery, for usury, robbery, and theft, without jeopardy or fear of punishment by death, then He would have been acclaimed a fine king. But He declares: “People will be your enemies and hate you

for My sake. Because of Me the world will revile, defame, and kill you, and begrudge you even a morsel of bread or a moment of life.” Then flesh and blood reply: “Let the devil be a Christian in my stead! Go ahead and be a Christian. There is too much of a stench here for me. This is paying too high a price for steadfastness, that one must put everything at stake.” People say: “I am quite willing to make the beginning, but I will not remain.” Christ wants to say: “He who is bold and reckless will be called a true disciple of Mine.”

...Here is where the disciples of Christ come to the parting of the ways. The false disciples begin to believe, but they defect. The true disciples remain on the hard path or enter through the narrow gate (Matt. 7:14), namely, the Word of God, saying: “I am helpless. May God help me. It all rests in His hands. He promised and said: ‘Just cling to the Word, and I will uphold you. When you find yourself in any extremity or distress, you will learn to continue in God’s Word. This will liberate you and make you a true disciple.’ ”

[Pastor Fryer: So, that is Luther’s first theme: We should not only begin to Christ’s disciples, but we should continue. We should persevere, even in face of troubles and of the Cross. Next Luther speaks of the need for the Christian to forsake sin, indeed to turn away from slavery to sin. Luther begins with the words of Jesus from John 8:31-32]

If you keep My words, the truth will make you free.

Christ says here: “You are slaves to sin, and still you want to be masters and free. That will never happen. Learn to know the true freedom which Moses had in mind, namely, the freedom that hinges on piety, on abstention from sin, on obedience and on compliance with God’s commands. It is vain for you to sin and still expect to be free....It is inevitable that he who sins and remains in sin also incurs all the penalties imposed by the Law on sin—for example, death and all misery. St. Paul states (Rom. 6:23): “The wages of sin is death”; that is, death is the pay. Therefore he who serves sin and lives a life of sin also serves death and deserves hellfire as pay...Therefore if you want to be free, it must be your first concern to be rid of sin.

...If we want to be free, it must begin with this, that we are delivered from sin; for so long as sin remains, it is impossible to be free. If I do not want to abstain from sin and become pious, I may strive to be a master, God’s own, and free, but to no avail. You must first think of being freed from that which holds you in the firmest and closest bonds, that is, from sin. The first freedom is freedom from sin, for “he who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

...There are but a few who devote themselves to the real problem: how to get rid of sin. The majority are content to be free from the pope, from officials, and from other laws; but they are not concerned about serving Christ and being delivered from sin. Therefore it will come to pass that we, too, will not continue to live “in the house,” since slaves do not abide in the house forever.

Therefore see that you strive for a different freedom, a higher and loftier freedom than that of the flesh... You should strive for freedom from sin.

[Pastor Fryer: So never let it be said that Luther gives freedom to Christians to continue in sin. No, we should strive for freedom from sin.

Now, we end as Luther did, by lifting up Jesus Christ as the source of Christian freedom. Here Luther points to the children. I think Luther means something like this: When children give their hearts to Jesus, they try to follow him. Their faith is not a head trip for them, but a new way of life.

We conclude, then, with Luther's practical preaching on this text about the Son making us free: "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)]

But how is this accomplished? How does it come about? Here is the answer: "If the Son makes you free, etc." Everything revolves about this.

...Note well that the real freedom is freedom from sin. Without this the temple at Jerusalem will not help you; neither will the pope with his whole train, whether it be indulgences, papal bulls, fasting, rosaries, prayers, or anything else. Neither Jews nor the pope will make us free; only the Son can do this. How does it come about? When we hear His Word—for instance, that Christ was born of Mary, suffered, was crucified, died, was buried, rose from the dead on the third day, etc. "Oh," it is said, "I know all this very well! It is an old story. The pope, cardinals, and bishops are also familiar with it." Indeed, they do know it. But learn this lesson of the children, for these words tell us how we are redeemed and set free... The children are to be highly commended for praying these words and also for understanding them sooner; for the more learned and the smarter we old fools claim to be, the less we know and understand about this subject. To become free implies that you fix your thoughts on something else than that which lies in you, in the papacy, in the saints, or in Moses. You must direct your thoughts to something more exalted than all this, namely, the Son of God.

...Therefore it is fitting that we sit down beside the stove with the children and learn this lesson. Of course, some among us have learned from one sermon all there is to know! But when they are confronted with trials, these people are in sore need of having someone recite these words to them and of having a four-year-old child recite the Creed to them.

...This is fundamental, that a man reject all other means, ... that he cast everything else overboard and say: "This does not save me; it must all be discarded. If I am to find comfort, have peace in my conscience, and be rid of sin, then I must believe as children do."

This is a sublime sermon. The Holy Spirit presents and submits it to the children and to the simple-minded. Old fools like me learn this with great difficulty. Little children learn it best. Others learn this wisdom too well, assuming that when they have heard it once, they know it all. You must bear this in mind. "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Both hell and death are his masters.

He cannot escape them. How, then, can I become free? Men answer: “I will erect a chapel, endow an eternal Mass, go on pilgrimages, fast, become a monk, etc.” But Christ says: “...No, let Him who is called the Son of God deliver you from sin; then you are free. If you give yourself to Him and let Him set you free, all is well.”

[Pastor Fryer: Yes, “all is well,” through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.]