

Reformation Sunday  
October 30, 2016  
Immanuel Lutheran Church

By David S. Yeago

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” This saying of Jesus is among the better-known lines of the Bible. It serves as the motto of numerous institutions; indeed, it is etched into the wall in the lobby of the Original Headquarters Building of the Central Intelligence Agency. We can easily figure out the meaning it has in that context: “Truth” means “information” and “freedom” refers to the political independence of the United States. The CIA’s mission to gather and analyze information is necessary for the defense of this country’s freedom from its enemies.

Now, that inscription dates from a time sixty years ago when most people had lines and language from the King James Version of the Bible rattling around in their heads, which would pop out at the oddest moments. So I don’t believe that the planners of the CIA headquarters were trying to hijack the Bible for nefarious purposes. But that particular use of the Lord’s saying is perhaps typical, in a way, of a modern trend. We are, I suspect, inclined to equate Jesus’ “the truth shall make you free” with another saying that has been a kind of motto for the modern age, Francis Bacon’s “Knowledge is power.” That’s been the modern dream, hasn’t it, to gather knowledge of nature and society and use it to gain power over the conditions in which we live. With sufficient *knowledge*, we human beings will gain *power* and set ourselves *free*.

This modern project works well when it’s a matter of using scientific knowledge to free ourselves from smallpox or polio, but things quickly get complicated. The knowledge we have acquired has for example given us the power to free ourselves from *one another*, by killing on a vast scale. Knowledge and power enable us to get what we want, or rather, it enables those of us who *wield* power to get what *they* want. The knowledge that brings power doesn’t make us *wise*, doesn’t show us what is *good*, doesn’t teach us to *want* what is good.

The saying of Christ in its own context has a very different kind of truth in view, and a different freedom. He is not talking about a potential human achievement but about the work of God. The setting is Jesus' own presence and ministry, in which something utterly new and unexpected is happening. Jesus is a real human being, but his very presence in the world is a mystery, the result of God's action. He is said to have "come down from heaven" (John 3:31; 6:38), which means that he is not an *ordinary* man; he comes into the world by God's special initiative, a gift to humankind, not a product of human history.

In our lesson, he is speaking about true "discipleship." That is, he is talking about true reception of this new thing that is happening, with its center and source in his own presence in their midst. It's noteworthy that he does not define discipleship in terms of something the disciple must achieve. He doesn't say, "If you pray enough, if you live right, if you have a wonderful conversion experience, then you will truly be my disciples." Instead, he says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples." It almost seems disappointing. It sounds passive and unadventurous. "Just 'abide' in my word."

That word "Abide" deserves a closer look. It has two main meanings, both of which are in play here. "Abiding" is, to begin with, standing fast, staying put, remaining in place, persisting. Thus the old KJV translated, "*Continue* in my word." But "abiding" also means "dwelling," inhabiting, residing in a place. The true disciples are those who stick with Jesus' word, stand fast in it, make it their home. Peter and the Twelve modelled this true discipleship back in Chapter 6, when Jesus asked, "Do you also want to go away?" and Peter answered with the familiar words, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." I've often thought that Peter sounds less than enthusiastic: "Lord, you say crazy things and we don't understand them, but there is no alternative, no one like you, no one else from whom we can hope for life." Here in Chapter 8, Jesus says, "Just *that* is true discipleship – just persisting, just staying put, not letting go of my word."

Then come the famous words with which we began: "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." Coming from Jesus, in their proper setting, these words do not describe a project to be pursued by human beings, accumulating knowledge to achieve power. These words are a *promise* to the

disciples who abide in his word: they will be liberated, rescued, emancipated by “the truth.”

Last weekend, I had the privilege of hearing the great contemporary preacher Fleming Rutledge at a conference in Baltimore. She made an important point that’s relevant here: always pay attention, in the Bible, to the *agent*, the *doer*, the one who is *acting*. We have a habit of assuming that *we* are to be the agent, the ones who act, but in Scripture it is often not so. Hearing these famous words of Jesus, we are inclined to think that “the truth shall set you free” is a figure of speech, that the real meaning is that armed with the knowledge of the truth, we will be able to set ourselves free. But that’s not what the text says. Jesus presents “the truth” as the active agent, the emancipator. Truth will act, and you will be set free.

Before Jesus can explicate this odd way of speaking, he is interrupted. He has promised freedom, which sounds good, except that it implies that his hearers are not free already, that they are slaves. His audience is quick to pick up on that implication, and quick to take offense. “What do you mean, ‘set us free’? We’re no slaves!” This is, of course, the catch in any promise of salvation: it suggests that people *need* saving. It suggests that we are not OK just as we are, and that we are not able to put things right on our own.

These particular hearers of Jesus are Jews, so they have a Jewish reason for being offended: “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?” Actually, this is a pretty good reason for taking offence. That they are offspring of Abraham actually does mean something. God has indeed made a commitment to the family of Abraham that he will never take back. It’s just that being offspring of Abraham is not protection against every kind of enslavement.

Other people take offence at Jesus for much less interesting reasons. Everyone is inclined to believe that there is something about *me*, or something about *us*, which makes unthinkable that *we* could be slaves needing liberation. “We are free Americans and have never been enslaved to anyone.” “We are well-educated, sophisticated modern people. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?” To be sure, there are other people who need to be set free, foreigners, maybe, or ignorant, superstitious people who didn’t go to good schools – but us? Surely not!

Jesus' answer is blunt: "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." Of course, it's always *such* bad manners to bring *that* up. No one wants to be told about *sin*. We build up a pleasant, optimistic image of ourselves, of our kind of people, of our class or country, and we don't want it spoiled by talk of sin. We quickly and easily admit that we've made mistakes, that we've done things we're not proud of, but we are in a hurry to get past such unpleasantness and get back to contemplating our beautiful dreams.

Jesus won't let us get past it; he refuses to let us marginalize sin, or dismiss it as incidental. "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." The presence of sinful actions in human life, the crimes of nations but also the seemingly small unkindnesses of daily life, the turning of our eyes away from those in need, the secret thoughts and desires which others don't see – all these things, great and small, are signs, evidence, that we have fallen under the dominion of a destructive power. I must also credit Fleming Rutledge with the observation that every single New Testament book takes it as given that the human race is in the grip of such powers. Salvation in the NT is always rescue, deliverance, setting captives free.

And now Jesus expounds that strange language about the truth as *agent* of liberation: the *truth* shall set you free. He invokes the image of a household in which slaves have no secure place. The one whose status is assured is the son of the house, the heir, and *he* has the authority to set the slaves free. Now alongside "the Truth shall set you free" we have "the Son shall set you free." We realize perhaps that we should have capitalized "Truth" from the start, because the Truth which liberates is a *person*, the Son of God.

If we have paid attention to the Gospel of John from the start, we should be prepared for this development. Jesus is introduced in the Gospel as the eternal Word of the Father, by whom all things were made. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:4-5). This Gospel presents the story of Jesus as the story of the light coming into the world to drive away the darkness. "The Word," who is the Light, "became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). Earlier in our chapter 8, Jesus has claimed this: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." In our lesson, he has defined

further what is meant by following him: not great impressive spiritual achievements, but abiding in his word. And we have learned *why* his disciples do not walk in darkness: because the Incarnate Light, the Truth, sets them free.

What does such freedom mean? It does not mean that life becomes simple and easy. It does not mean that we no longer struggle with the power of darkness. It certainly does not mean that we are spiritual heroes for clinging to Christ's word. Christ the Light, Christ the Truth, is the agent, the doer, the liberator. His word reaches us through his messengers, through his church, in Scripture, in preaching, in the sacraments, and through it he continually beats back the darkness that is always ready to overwhelm us.

Against the shadows of confusion and temptation around us, Christ's word is a light to our path, as the Psalmist says, disclosing perhaps only one step forward at a time, but never leaving us helpless in the dark. If we abide in his word, his Light will not let us be deceived and destroyed by the lies, great and small, which permeate the world.

Against the darkness inside our own hearts, the tangle of anxiety and craving, resentment and anger, fear and folly that we all carry around, Christ's word shines and exposes what we don't want to see, but it also heals and makes new. St. Paul wrote that "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). That light, that knowledge, the perception of God's glory shining in the face of Christ, draws us in new directions, gives us something new and marvelous to care about and hope for, even as it shows up the foolishness and pointlessness of much that we yearn for and worry and get angry about.

Finally, against the shadow of death, the truly fearful power which we exhaust ourselves denying and evading, the word of Christ offers hope contrary all appearances. Standing in the presence of death, on his way to the tomb of a friend, Jesus declares, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." The Light, you see, is life, and where the light shines, death cannot have the last word: "though he die, yet shall he live."

On Reformation Sunday, it is good to recall that despite the inappropriate adulation of many Protestant generations, Martin Luther did not regard himself as a hero or a liberator. He hated the word "Lutheran" with a passion: "I myself don't know Luther and I don't want to know him. Nor do I preach Luther, but Christ." In his own eyes, Luther was a sinful man who clung to the word of Christ. Terrible events unfolded around him, which he could only explain as the tribulations of the Last Days. His health was bad, his body was often in pain, he suffered the death of children and the loss of friends. He made stupid mistakes and often he did not handle anger well.

What Luther did have was confidence that Christ is the truth and the light who sets us free. Commenting on the declaration of this Gospel that Christ is the light of human beings, he wrote that "it follows that man has no other light than Christ, God's Son in the flesh. And whoever believes that Christ is true God, and that in him is life, will be illuminated and enlivened by this light. The light supports him, so that he may remain where Christ is. As the divine nature [made flesh in Christ] is an eternal *life*, so this same light is an eternal *light*, and just as this life can never die, this light can never be put out, and faith in it can never die." To Christ the life-giving Truth be glory forevermore. Amen.