

Sermon – John 8:31-36
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Grace Lutheran Church
Reformation – Year A
29 October 2017

“The Truth Will Make You Free”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. A few weeks ago, caught up in a rare do-it-yourself fervor, I decided to replace the lock on the door that leads from our basement to our backyard. After a mandatory trip to The Home Depot, I got to work. I successfully removed the old hardware and installed the new deadbolt. All was going well. So far. I moved on to the doorknob assembly. The first task, of course, was to install the latch assembly, the cartridge containing the little latch that is depressed when the door is closing and then springs into the strike plate on the doorframe to hold the door shut. Thinking that it would be better to check my work before installing the doorknob, I wanted to make sure the latch lined up with the strike plate. And wouldn't you know, it slid right in, perfectly aligned. I sat back on my knees, sinful pride welling up within me. But, as always, pride cometh before the fall. All of you who are smarter than me – and I think that's pretty much everyone here – know the cause of my downfall. A few seconds later, I realized my error. Once the latch is secure within the strike plate, there's no way to unlatch it. Unless you have a doorknob. Which I had thus far failed to install. It was, *because of course it was*, at this exact moment that Erika descended the basement steps. She took one look at the situation and started laughing, that special laugh that God has given to wives whose husbands have done something incredibly stupid. At that moment, I had two thoughts: First, that the “yourself” in do-it-yourself doesn't really apply to me; second, that God can work even through my bumbling ineptitude to provide a perfect sermon illustration for Reformation

Sunday. For there I was, in bondage, and I could not free myself. It turns out that even my mistakes are Lutheran.

2. Our story is one of doors, of being bound and locked out, and it is a story we have brought upon ourselves. We might think today of that door on the Castle Church in Wittenberg to which Luther nailed his theses 500 years ago, but it's a story that begins long before that: a story marked by our rebellion against the Creator God, by slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon, by Roman oppression and God's law that would not be kept in thought, word, or deed. A story marked by our own sinfulness even today, our own failure to keep covenant, to love the Lord our God, to love our neighbors as ourselves. We find ourselves trapped, locked behind doors without doorknobs. And while I was able to pry open my basement door that day with a really long screwdriver, the doors we have locked, which should rightly open toward God and neighbor, require a solution of an entirely different sort. We need Jesus. On this day when we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, we do not so much celebrate our own particular heritage as we follow Luther's line of vision and gaze upon the only One who can set us free: Jesus, the Christ, our Savior.

3. We find Jesus today in John's gospel in Jerusalem during the Festival of Tabernacles as the people celebrate God's saving presence with them as they journeyed through the Wilderness to the Promised Land. To those who have believed in Jesus, he says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And how do the people respond to these words of grace? By taking offense! "We are descendants of Abraham," they say, "and have never been slaves to anyone." Now, apart from the patent absurdity of their words – after all the children of Abraham had hardly ever been truly free and had, in fact, spent centuries enslaved in Egypt – there's something deeper going on here. For they, like all people, take umbrage at the notion that they are not free, not

- masters of their own destinies, that things are really so far gone. From what do they need to be saved? From their sin, which binds them. From our sin, which binds us. Oh, we have freedom, but only enough to get us into trouble, not nearly enough to get ourselves out of it. The people, you see, have forgotten not only their history but also their surroundings. During the Festival of Tabernacles, great fires would be lighted in Jerusalem, reminding the people of the God who travelled with them, lighting their way by a pillar of fire by night. But Jesus reshapes this image for his own purposes, declaring himself a few verses earlier as “I Am,” the One who is the Light of the World.
4. It is this Light that Jesus invites the people to follow into freedom, this Word in which he invites his listeners to continue – the very same Word that was in the beginning, this Word by which God spoke creation into existence. In the first of his *95 Theses*, Luther reminds us that the entire Christian life is one of repentance, of turning around from our sin and looking upon Christ – this Jesus who manifests the fullness of the glory of God not in bright, flashing fire but in darkness upon a hillside, crucified for our sin. Only then, only in his death, is the locked door burst open, the stone rolled away, as the light of resurrection freedom breaks upon the horizon of this world.
 5. Continue in my Word, Jesus says. Look to me and me alone, and discover through the Spirit the promises of God, enumerated here by Jesus as discipleship, truth, and freedom. All other paths, as Paul makes clear to the Romans, lead to locked doors for Jew and Gentile alike. But now, apart from sin, apart from our strivings and in spite of our failures, justification has come by grace through faith – and we, in Christ, are made right with God and put back into right relationship with one another. *Discipleship*: following Jesus and looking to him alone. *Truth*: knowing the reality of our sin and separation but the even greater reality of forgiveness that flows from the cross. And *freedom*, which is exactly that: the new creation in which the door

to life abundant and eternal has been opened wide and will never again be closed to us as we enter into the Kingdom that cannot be wrenched away.

6. Today we commemorate the man who nailed his theses to the church door, but it was not Luther who could open the door. Only Jesus can do so, and the grace of that truth is where Luther staked his life. So do we, for there is no other hope to be found nor any other hope that is needed. Christ and his cross are enough. As Jeremiah foretold, God would one day make a new covenant, writing it upon the hearts of the people. You know, parenthood has taught me a few things about teaching and about learning. I watch my children mastering new skills: riding a two-wheeled bike or tying their shoes; learning to count to 100 or mastering a piano piece for a recital. Such learning can be frustrating, both for the child and for the parent. But the joy that happens once they have learned it by heart is a revelation, for parent and child alike. To know something by heart is to have it become part of one's being (in way that home repair will never be for me!). Once we know something by heart, once it is written upon our hearts, it can never be taken away from us – and this is never more true than when it is God who places it in our hearts. And this is where God has written the new covenant, no longer relying on our ability to learn it. Oh, there's much for us to learn, but it's all already there. You have been marked with the cross of Christ. You have God's law of love written upon your hearts. You are called to follow Jesus, and by grace you will do so, knowing both truth and freedom. The locks on the doors have been broken forever. Christ who was dead is alive. He is free and he has made you free, indeed. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.