

Confirmation Sunday

May 5, 2019

1 John 8:30-36: “The Truth Will Set You Free”

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our Gospel lesson for this morning begins with the words: "As he [Jesus] was saying these things, many believed in him." In a similar way, many people have gone through Jr. Confirmation and Bible Investigation Class and have become believers in Jesus. But how long will it really last? This is the underlying issue that Jesus appears to be addressing when he says, "*If you abide* in my word, you are truly my disciples (8:31)." He says "*if you abide*." It's as if Jesus is asking, "Will you abide in my word? Will you really? Perhaps you will not remain with me at all."

Christ then turns his attention to true and false disciples. The assumption at this point in time is that, by virtue of your confession, you are all true disciples. Soon, you are going to be making your confirmation vows - as many of us have already done in the past - and you will say something like this, "We will remain with you dear Jesus! We will suffer all, even death, rather than fall away. We will use the Word and Sacraments and in faith, word, and action remain true!" Sounds a lot like Simon Peter who said to Jesus on the night of his betrayal (Matthew 26:33), "I will never fall away." We know the rest of the story. Peter fell away and by God's grace returned. The words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:12 are most appropriate at this point: "let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

There's a story told about a Professor of Biology who was an atheist - who did not believe in God. Every year he began his lectures on evolution by asking if any of the students were religious. When they identified themselves he boasted that by the end of his course they would all know evolution was the truth and they would become atheists with him. Over the years, many a student lost their faith during his course.

One day the atheist professor was walking through the forest, marveling at the wonderful world. His wondering was interrupted by a growl. He turned to see a large, hungry and cranky grizzly bear charging towards him. The professor began to run, but it was no use, the bear was too fast. The professor tripped, and the next thing he knew was that the grizzly bear was standing above him, one foot on his chest, his paw ready to strike. With terror in his eyes, the atheist professor realized he was about to experience "survival of the fittest" first hand. At that point, he cried out with a loud voice, "God help me!"

Time stopped! The bear froze. The forest was silent. A bright light shone down upon the atheist and a voice boomed from the heavens, "You deny my existence for all of these years, teach others I don't exist, and even credit creation to a cosmic accident. Do you really expect me to help you out of this predicament? Am I to count you as a believer in me?"

The atheist professor looked up into the light, "It would be hypocritical of me to suddenly ask you to treat me as a Christian right now...but perhaps could you make the bear a Christian?" "Very well," the voice said. The light went out and the sounds of the forest resumed. And then the bear dropped its right paw, brought both paws together, bowed its head and prayed: "Lord, for this food which I am about to receive, I am truly thankful."

Perhaps the story was a little bit too much on the funny side. Still, it magnifies two points that I want to make. First, we need to understand that this unbelieving world is full of people just like the atheist professor - all kinds of people who want to destroy faith in Christ by whatever means possible - not just by evolution, but by all that is in the world, "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life." As the apostle John writes, this unbelieving world "is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:15-17)."

Secondly, there is a growling, hungry, cranky grizzly bear lurking in what might appear to be nothing but a wonderful world. The Scripture calls him "a roaring lion seeking to devour." He pretends to be a messenger of good things, but he is a murderer. Satan seems to bring the good life, but he really brings nothing but death - forever death. As the *Large Catechism* states: "his purpose is to make us scorn and despise both the Word and the works of God, to tear us away from faith, hope, and love, to draw us into unbelief, false security, and stubbornness, or, on the contrary, to drive us into despair, atheism, blasphemy, and countless other abominable sins."

We either face this unbelieving world and the grizzly bear of Satan and death alone, or with Jesus. Alone, we do not stand a chance. With Jesus, there is victory.

You may not want to hear it, but I'm going to say it anyway. Over the years, Pastor Bill and I have seen a heartbreaking thing. After years of classes and studying and learning about the faith, it may happen that most, or even all of you are going to lose your faith in Christ. Whether you will return to it or not, only God knows. Already now, and especially after today, there will be a lot of things, a lot of other options that will pull you from church and away from the faith. I am saying these things to warn you. You are in a battle for your life - your eternal life. The roaring lion and the lionesses are hiding in the grass and hunting you now, as I speak. This unbelieving world is already knocking on your door. As one pastor writes:

And here is the thing about church. If you are looking for great music, the radio will always have something that sounds better. If you are looking for an entertaining sermon, tv and movies will always be more appealing. If you are looking for food that tastes better than bread and wine, any restaurant has better. If you are looking for fun youth events, family programming or seniors groups, the YMCA, the mall or and most community groups can do more than we can. The church is just not as cool as the world.

But Jesus says in Matthew 16:26, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" And, with these words, let us add the words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson for this morning where he powerfully says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Now you know what the church gives! You'll never find it anywhere else. Again Jesus: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them (Matthew 18:20)." And what is the name of Jesus? The name of Jesus is the means of grace - the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. If you want to be with your Lord and Savior in this life, if you desire to abide in him, he is found in his name where all of us gather around to mutually encourage and console one another in that name.

In fact, he has placed his name on and in you. This took place in your Baptism. Today, you are confirming your identity - that you are a Christian, a child of God who has grown to a level of maturity where you know and believe that the body and blood of Christ is in, with, and under the bread and wine for you to eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins. You are living your Baptisms as you confessed your sins and received absolution in preparation to meet Jesus at the table where he gives himself to you and heaven through faith. In these ways, you are participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and receiving the very "money" that was used to purchase you from sin, death, and the devil.

Whenever you hear the word of God preached in its truth and purity, it is the voice of Jesus. Whenever you confess your sins, you die with Jesus. Whenever you receive forgiveness, you are raised in his resurrection. Whenever you come to the Sacrament of the Altar, Jesus is there giving himself to you and assuring you that he loves you with an everlasting love. In these ways you are abiding in Jesus, who lived a perfect life on your behalf and who suffered and died for all of your sins so that, believing in him, you may one day be with him in paradise! Jesus, who is the Truth, has set you free! Do not then return to those things which will make you a slave of death and hell. Rather, abide with him in the freedom of the good news of salvation. You have been set free with a freedom that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Freedom from sin, death, and hell is found with the invisible church (the church of faith) where the word is preached in its truth and purity and the sacraments are administered according to the command of Jesus.

Do you want to be with Jesus forever? Do you want to make it from the church in this life to the kingdom of glory which is paradise? Then Jesus must do this for you from start to finish. He who has created faith in you must bring it to completion. But how can this be done if you chose to no longer abide in him who has embraced you? The Truth who has set you free must remain in you, and if you ever fall from The Truth, only The Truth can release you from your slavery and bring you back again. The Truth Will Set you Free. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, put on Jesus, for you are in a fierce battle for your souls. "Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth." And, as the disciples said to Jesus on the day of his resurrection, let us also pray to him: "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent."

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott