

REFORMATION SUNDAY

October 29, 2023

St. John 8:31,32:

“If You Abide in My Word”

- I. The Church Today.
- II. Jesus.
- III. Luther and Us.

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 N. Oakland Avenue
Decatur Illinois 62526

St. John 8:31,32

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was April 18, 1521 when Martin Luther spoke his great words regarding his position on God's Scripture and salvation by grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ: "Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me." His confession was based on such Scripture as, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16)." *The Gospel is the power of God.* That stands with the Psalmist's words, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Ps.119:105)."

With that in mind please listen to the word God spoke to Ezekiel some 2,100 years before Luther: "As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of houses, say to one another, each to his brother, "...Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord." And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on gain (Ez. 33:30,31)." Sounds like much of the church today.

Over 200 years before Ezekiel God would say through the prophet Hosea, "My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge...I also will forget your children (Hos. 4:6)." And this: "...and a people without understanding shall come to ruin (Hos.4:14)."

It's a series of leaps from Hosea to Ezekiel to Luther to the present - but nothing ever changes. God's people have been consistent in their penchant for something new, and getting in step with the thinking of the day. On one hand it's "The Word of God, the Word of God!" On the other hand the Word must be embellished because the flesh cries out for the salt of the new and exciting! It's always been that way. And Jesus stands before us and says . . .

"IF YOU ABIDE IN MY WORD"

I. The Church Today.

Over the years we've had many non-members stopping by or calling for money for a multitude of reasons. I've never forgotten the person who, in the course of our discussion, insisted, "Doesn't the church get subsidized by the government?" I said, "The only thing that gets subsidized by the government is the government, and that by taxpayers." And then there was the lady who called the parsonage asking for help to get food. Pat and I asked her to give us a list of items and we would buy them and bring it to where she lived. She agreed. When I asked for her address she hung up.

The church today is mostly seen as a material aid station, or a place offering entertainment venues in the name of love while encouraging people to do their best, whatever that means by today's standards. In 2002 Dr. Gene Edward Veith, former Lutheran Seminary Professor wrote:

"First the vogue was for local churches to drop their denominational affiliation from their name. Then came the fad of dropping the word *church*. The Community Assembly of God Church became first 'Community Church' and then 'The Community Family Worship Center.' Now words that so much connote religious activities are considered too negative for the unchurched, so we have congregations that go by names such as 'The Center for Family Love.'

"Some churches are doing everything they can to eliminate anything that might make them seem like churches. Get rid of hymns. Get rid of Scripture readings. Get rid of the sermon. Make it all a pop concert or a TV talk show. If this is all there is, no wonder more and more Christians think they might as well stay at home." (Camping Out, by Gene Edward Veith, World Magazine, April 20, 2002, Vol 17, No. 15, p. 14).

If this is all there is. And that's where we find Luther prior to October 31, 1517. The agony of his soul was no more prominent then when he celebrated mass and would cry, "I am dust and ashes and full of sin!" And the church's answer then is similar to the church's answer today, only without the ceremony: "Hey, get in there and give it your best! Do this and that and God will do this and that, and finally, through one program or another you'll work it out and be happy!" Pure nonsense!

II. Jesus.

This congregation is a Reformation Church. Who we are and what we offer rests on Jesus' words from our text: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (Jn.8:31,32)." The truth will set you free. The question is, *free from what since we still struggle with sin.* Free from condemnation because Jesus took our sin upon Himself and paid for every sin of every human on the Cross. As Scripture says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rm.8:1)." What those words mean is what we confess from the Augsburg Confession of the Lutheran Church:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God (that is, we become holy, acceptable before God) by grace (God's undeserved love), for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness... (Tappert, The Book of Concord, The Augsburg Confession, Article IV [Justification], p.30:1-3).

I also recalled a conversation from some years ago with an atheist who asked me, "What if you're wrong about Heaven and Hell? What if there's nothing? Then what?" I found the questions typical, especially the "Then what?" part. I answered by saying, "If there isn't it won't make any difference. I won't be concerned or aware of it since I won't exist." And then, I asked him: "What if you discover there is a heaven and hell - and there is - and what if Jesus is who He says He is and He is the only way to Heaven, then what? He smirked and said, "We'll see." I answered, "Indeed, we will!"

We are a Reformation church. The issue isn't about numbers and gaining popularity with what the world wants. It's about "the wages of sin is death." It's about forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life through faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The basis for who we are and what we do is anchored in the Scriptures.

III. Luther and Us.

In their introduction to Luther's The Bondage of the Will, translators J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston wrote . . .

Luther was a pastor and a preacher ministering to a congregation - that of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. His people knew that there was never a man farther removed from the dry academic than Dr. Martin. His teaching was vital, personal and compelling. The light he had gained from the Scriptures forced him to live by and preach the truth which he had found. The same was true when he applied his doctrine to his congregation. He knew eternity was in the balance every time he preached to his sturdy Saxon audience. (The Bondage of the Will, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957, p.22.)

What Luther preached and taught is what our text impresses on us, once again our text: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Abide in the Word, not what man thinks and wants; not bits and pieces of the Word according to the wants and the desires of the flesh. The Word. The inspired, inerrant, authoritative Word of God.

Let's make sure this is straight with us: God hates every sin and doesn't want us to make pitiful excuses for them. Your sin is your fault; my sin is my fault. We can't blame circumstances or others for our sin. Left alone in our sin we would find ourselves banished from the love of God who so loved the world, forgotten by God who knows all things. Martin Luther put it this way: "The article of justification, which is our only protection, not only against all powers and plottings of men but also against the gates of hell, is this: by faith alone...in Christ, without works, we are declared just and saved." The sin is still there and the ups and downs with it are every day. But struggle we must and we remember that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin - not our works. So, let's remember Jesus' words: "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (Jn.8:36)."

In 1546, Luther was called to Eisleben, Germany where he was asked to settle a dispute between two brothers. While there, he one day complained about chest pains. He went to his room. The pains continued. After midnight he had another attack. As he was about to pass away, his dear friend Justus Jonas approached him and asked: "Venerable father, will you die steadfastly adhering to Christ and the doctrines you have preached?" Luther very clearly answered, "Yes!" He passed away between two and three o'clock on Thursday morning, February 18, 1546. He was buried near the pulpit in the Castle Church at Wittenberg, Germany.

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word Luther was set free from the fear of sin, death and hell. The Lord grant us strength to **Abide In His Word**; to hold on to the free gift of eternal life through faith in Christ, and not by works. **Here We Stand. We Can Do No Other. God Help Us.**

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott