## John 8:31-36

## “Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

When I was a child, my mother taught me what it meant to be loved unconditionally, at least as unconditionally as a human parent can love a child. She helped me to know God's love through her forgiveness, love and grace. However, Mom had her moments, some of which had lasting consequences. Almost from the time I learned to walk, Mom affectionately called me “Grace,” but she didn't mean it in the sweet way you might imagine. Rather, Mom used the beautiful name, “Grace,” to refer to the distinctly ungraceful way in which I moved. I frequently tripped, fell, wrecked my bike, poked myself in the eye, bruised my knees, knocked my ankles together and generally stumbled my way through childhood. There were no ballet classes for me, no school athletic awards, no spot on the cheer leading team, though, for some reason, I did muster up the guts to try out, after which they politely dismissed me. I will never master the art of the graceful glide, thanks to my tendency to lose coordination between these two size tens. I still sometimes hear Mom's voice in my head, calling me “Grace” but meaning the opposite. I don't hold any hard feelings because Mom was just straightforwardly sharing her observations, as she was prone to do. Besides, she had her own trouble navigating through life with her own size elevens.

My mom's playful nickname was probably my first taste of wanting to possess what I could not conjure up on my own. Grace. Truth. Freedom. These are all words that hold special significance to us this Reformation Sunday. Martin Luther talked a lot about grace and truth and freedom as did the apostle Paul and all the Gospel writers, particularly John. When we read about these men and what they wrote, when we really pay attention to it, we discover that most all of us live in totally opposite ways from what God intends for us. For all our bravado and insistence on being self-made women and men, we are often blind to the fact that we cannot make it on our own. Our lack of grace, in the physical, but most especially the spiritual sense of it, leads to awkward, stumbling lives. Our dangerously inaccurate definitions of truth contradict what God's truth means for our lives and our world. And freedom? We who insist we possess it don't have a clue about its real meaning.

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” The people to whom Jesus first spoke these words believed in him, even if it was in a halting, hesitant way. All it took was for Jesus to imply that they weren't free to get their backs up. “We are descendants of Abraham.” These men who had risen to positions of respect and authority in the temple just weren't buying what Jesus was saying. “We have never been slaves to anyone.” Had they developed collected amnesia? What about the Egyptians? Or the Persians or the Assyrians? What about the Romans, in whose servitude they were living right then? “We have never been slaves to anyone.” Really? These descendents of Abraham were enslaved for most of their history. If it weren't for God, they wouldn't even be there to listen to Jesus that day. They just didn't get it.

“We have never been slaves to anyone.” “We are Americans.” We who claim to live in the land of the free are hard-pressed to admit our own slavery. It's difficult for us to acknowledge when grace is missing from our lives and, even worse, when others need it from us. Our collective insistence on always being right makes us blind to our desperate need for forgiveness. We live in a culture that worships the self-made woman and man, that pressures us to act as if we have it all together: great job, great relationships, great family, great future. We find ourselves increasingly turning to social media for validation that we are living the ideal life or at least moving in that direction. However, a recent poll revealed that four of the five most popular social media platforms increase negative feelings in users, particularly among teens and young adults. We look at other people's lives as pictured on Instagram or facebook and see them as more exciting and happy and complete than ours, even when we know those posts are relatively artificial.

Let's be honest: nobody looks that way or eats that food or interacts with their family so perfectly every day. Yet we stubbornly compare our lives to those “better” ones and end up feeling inadequate. And so we work harder at seeming happier, we purchase more stuff so it looks like we have abundant life, we post more artificial pictures of ourselves to boost our confidence. We compare ourselves to those we envy, never knowing that inside they often feel as empty as we do. Opposite Land. Our insistence on making it on our own builds us a house there and no matter how good it looks on the outside, its foundation could crumble at any moment.

Grace. Truth. Freedom. If we just try hard enough, we tell ourselves, we can conjure them up for ourselves. And all the while, God is watching, waiting, willing us to admit our deep need for God. Our yearning for unconditional love. Our need for true forgiveness. Our need for meaning for our lives. We will never find them on facebook or Instagram or Twitter. Simply put, we find them in Jesus Christ, God's son and our savior. When we fall to our knees we learn that the truth of the Son, the truth at the heart of the Reformation, is that we are all sinners. As David Lose puts it: “[We are] God's fallen, at times flailing, regularly confused, and always imperfect children, from birth to death. Sinners that no amount of indulgences or good works or good intentions or status updates or creative social media posts can redeem.” We simply cannot save ourselves; every attempt to do so leaves us further and further from the one who saves us from ourselves. Our very lives depend on the grace, truth and freedom the Son showers upon us. When God drowns the sin within us, we rise to the surface of our baptismal waters, gasping for love and forgiveness, which God is always ready to wrap around us.

Paul wrote, “All have sinned and fallen short...all are now justified by God's grace as a gift.” A glorious free gift. That is what this day, this reformation of our lives and of Christ's church is all about. The truth is here for us. Grace abides in us. We are free to love as Jesus loved, to free those we have enslaved, to remove earthly shackles like poverty and illness and hate, to have our sight tuned to the colossal need around us, to act as God's agents of love in this messed up world. This is what Elizabeth Cady Stanton, suffragette and human rights activist, was getting at when she wrote over 100 years ago, “Every truth we see is ours to give the world, not to keep for ourselves alone, for in so doing we cheat humanity out of their rights and check our own development.”

And it's what Martin Luther meant 500 years ago when he wrote, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

“You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” Here is the truth at its most basic: You and I are sinners. We are not perfect. We stumble more than we stand up straight. But God who loves us calls us *blessed* and *beautiful* and *beloved*. God frees us from our pasts so they do not define our futures. God loves us, all of us who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Through no efforts of our own, grace and truth and freedom are the gifts of our wildly loving God, who not only gives them to us but gives us the faith to know where they come from and then to spend our lives passing them along.

*“Semper Reformanda”* - always reforming. This is the work of God. We who find our roots deep in a different time and place are called to learn from the past but not to dwell there. On this Reformation Sunday, when we stop to remember all that that has made us Lutherans, we listen to the truth as Tim Christensen puts it, “In a fast-changing world we may be tempted to throw out the anchor and honor the past, but we are also called by God's living Word to unfurl the sails and be on the move.” With the Holy Spirit at our back, filling those canvases, we sail in a world that is filled with danger. But we know the truth and it frees us to move and live and act with certainty – the certainty that God is with us always. Always, God is *Semper Reformanda,* leading us into new opportunities to proclaim God's grace, truth and freedom to all who are in bondage to the opposite of what God wills for them. This is what Reformation is all about – moving forward, always forward with the truth of God in our hearts and our hands. As my second favorite theologian, Lyle Lovett, sings, “Yes and Amen!”

*Reformation 2017*

*October 29, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 8:31-36*

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**- Elizabeth Cady Stanton**