



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Sermon for Reformation Sunday

St. John 8:31-32

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Some people might find it odd that we Anglicans are celebrating a Lutheran festival today. Reformation Day commemorates Martin Luther's nailing his Ninety-five Theses to the church door in Wittenburg on October 31, 1517. I think it's worth departing from our own calendar here because it's important for us to remember the Reformation. We are "Catholic", but it's also true that we are "*Reformed Catholics*". As Anglicans we stand with one foot very firmly and forever planted in the teachings and traditions of the One, Holy, Catholic and Church that was established by the Apostles, but we also stand with the other foot very much in the Protestant Reformation. During the Middle Ages the Church lost her way, and especially so in Western Europe. Her control fell into the hands of corrupt men who wouldn't have known Jesus had he been sitting right next to them. And as the centuries went by the historic doctrines of grace that had been handed down by the Apostles and that had been written for us in the Bible became twisted and intermingled with false teaching. In very large part English Christians owe a debt to Luther for kicking off a movement that drew the Church back to the apostolic faith and back to the Word of God.

In our Gospel lesson from John 8 we read about the importance of God's Word. Look at what Jesus says in verses 31 and 32:

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

We know that eternal life and freedom are found in Jesus Christ and that to have those things for ourselves we need

to follow him. That means *trusting* him and *following* his lead and his teachings—*abiding* in him. And he says that we do this as we abide in *his* Word. It's only there that we find God's truth in contrast with the lies and foolish thinking of the world. It's only there that we find the truth that by trusting in Jesus we can not only have our sins forgiven, but that we can actually conquer them.

In the previous verse, in John 8:30, John tells us that, "As [Jesus] was saying these things, many believed in him." Now he immediately follows that up with these words of warning. "If you want to be a *true* disciple, you will *abide* in my Word." In chapter six we read about some people who had, early on, followed Jesus, but as the months and years went by they fell away. They had been "believers", but not believers in the New Testament sense of those who had a real and saving faith. They believed in the sense that they heard Jesus saying some good things that they liked and that they agreed with, but they didn't really *abide* in his teaching. They liked his moral teaching, but maybe they really didn't want to admit that they couldn't live up to it—that they were sinners. Maybe some of them liked the idea of Jesus as their Saviour, but they didn't like the idea of truly making him their Lord.

We've all seen people like this. Maybe at some point we *were* people like this. I hope that none of us still is. We've seen people who hear the Gospel message and the turn to Jesus, maybe they get very excited about the whole thing and they throw themselves into all sorts of Church-related activities and groups, and then suddenly they vanish, they drop out of the Church and we never hear from them again. What happened?

They didn't *abide*. Brothers and sisters, this is why I've so often stressed the need for a biblical understanding not only of the Gospel, but also of conversion and evangelism. The views of those things that dominate the evangelical community these days are decidedly *unbiblical*. The common wisdom taught today tells preachers that to bring people to Jesus you tell them

about all the blessings Jesus offers, but to make sure you don't talk about sin—because reminding people that they're sinners will scare them away or make them feel bad about themselves. But, friends, if that's what we're presenting, we're *not* presenting the Gospel. Why would anyone be attracted to the Gospel without an understanding of their sin and their need for redemption? The Church's purpose isn't to attract people to programmes and activities or even to make them feel good about themselves. It's to preach the Gospel: to teach men and women that they are sinners, that Jesus Christ offers redemption through the blood he shed on the cross, and that we can take part in that redemption by humbling ourselves and abiding in him.

When I was a kid my family was involved with a group whose purpose was to evangelise children. And yet the goal of the leaders was simply to tell the kids about Jesus and then pressure them to pray the "Sinner's Prayer" with scary stories about hell. Frankly, most of the kids only went because it meant that they were excused from school an hour early once a week. They were ready to tell the leaders whatever they wanted to hear as long as it meant less school. And yet each kid that prayed the prayer was chalked up as "one more for Jesus" and then cut loose with the assurance that he or she was saved—regardless of the fact that few if any of them had any real understanding of the Gospel and even fewer walked with Jesus. There was no "abiding in Christ" in that ministry. But this doesn't just happen with elementary school kids. The Church often does the same thing with adults. We attract them to the Church with promises of blessings, but give them no real understanding of the Gospel. When they say "Yes" to our promises we assure them of a pardon for sins that they very well may not really have, and then we cut them loose worse off than they were before. At least before they were simply lost. But after the Church got to them and failed to truly communicate the Gospel, they're still on the road to hell, but now they're full of false assurances that they're not.

But brothers and sisters this isn't a new problem. The Reformation had it's start because men who were abiding in the

Word and in Jesus realised that what the Church was teaching in their own day was no longer the Gospel. Martin Luther had been studying and teaching for years on this subject. He was a parish priest and a seminary professor and as he studied and taught he saw more and more the need for reform. He was happy to do it by quietly teaching his congregation and his students. But as he saw souls increasingly led astray from the Gospel he realised that he had to speak out publically against the corrupt leadership and against the teachings that were endangering the souls in his care.

Specifically, what set him off was the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were sort of the ultimate convergence of bad teaching and corrupt church leadership. Over the years Christians had come to believe that no one can enter heaven until he or she has been made perfectly holy. In other words, Jesus saves us—and every Christian will eventually get to heaven after he or she dies—but as long as there's any sin left in our lives, we won't be able to enter the presence of our holy God. This is where the doctrine of Purgatory became important, because it was supposedly in Purgatory that redeemed people would suffer until they had both ceased to sin and paid the temporal penalties for the sins they had committed. The Church also taught that a few people—the “saints”—had not only achieved perfect sanctification in this life, but had actually performed good works above and beyond the requirement to enter heaven. The leadership of the Church then claimed that all that excess of merit of the saints was stored up in a treasury and that they could dispense it as they saw fit. An indulgence was the giving out of a portion of this merit with the assurance that it would take so many days or years off your time in Purgatory. I think you can see how this undermines the Gospel.

At first the Church at gave these indulgences out to people who had done some good work and who had shown remorse for their sins, but it didn't take before the Church started giving out indulgences in return for cash contributions. This concerned Luther.

He saw the people he was shepherding and knew that they genuinely wanted to follow Christ, but that the Church was leading them astray. Take for example Frederick the Wise. He was Luther's prince. He was simple and sincere in his Christian faith, but he was being led away from trusting in Jesus alone. The Church of the day had also developed superstitious ideas about the relics of saints and Frederick fell for this superstition hook, line, and sinker. He had one of the largest collections in Europe. In fact, when it was catalogued in 1509 he had 5,005 difference relics. Each one came with an indulgence attached to it and all together those indulgences promised him a 1,443 year reduction of his time in Purgatory.

Here are just a few of the items in his collection: One tooth of St. Jerome, four pieces of St. Chrysostom, six of St. Bernard, and four of St. Augustine. Four of Mary's hairs, three pieces of her cloak, four from her girdle, and seven from the veil sprinkled with the blood of Christ. He also had one piece from Jesus' swaddling clothes, thirteen from his crib, a wisp of straw from the stable, one of the goldpieces brought by the wisemen and three pieces of their myrrh, one strand of hair from Jesus' beard, one of the nails from his crucifixion, a piece of bread from the last supper, and even a twig from Moses' burning bush. Ten years after the catalogue was made Frederick's collection grew from 5,000 to over 19,000 relics and the Church leadership offered an indulgence of 1,902,202 years out of Purgatory to anyone who went to pay these relics homage and make the “suggested” cash contribution every All Saints' Day.

Luther became more and more concerned about this sort of thing as he saw his people being led further and further astray. But what finally pushed him over the edge and motivated him to take public action were the indulgences that the Pope was peddling to finance the construction of St. Peter's in Rome. This is the same St. Peter's that everyone goes to visit today. It was hugely expensive and the Pope's treasury was running dry, so he decided

to fund construction by sending his men through Europe selling indulgences. One particular man, Johan Tetzel, really got Luther's goat. Indulgences were at least supposed to be sold only to people who were penitent, but Tetzel came into town with his cash box and appealed to people to make their contribution on half of their dead fathers and mothers who were languishing in Purgatory. All the people had to do was make their contribution and these poor souls would be freed. He even had a little advertising jingle: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs.” It doesn't get much more crass than that. That was it for Luther. He could no longer stand by and see the people in his spiritual care being led away from the simple need to abide in Christ. He started a reformation—a move to take the Church back to the Bible and to the faith once delivered to the saints.

And yet “reformation” isn't just something that we can look back to as having happened five hundred years ago—as if we're all good now. Reformation is something that the Church needs to be doing on a constant basis—something we need to be doing to ensure that we continue to be steeped in the Scriptures and to be sure that we are continuing in that faith once delivered to the saints. This is why I think it's worth celebrating Reformation Day. It's a reminder to us to keep Luther's work going. The fact is that he wasn't the first “reformer”—he, himself, was following in the footsteps of even older reformers of the Church. Reformation is always an imperative.

The faith is still being assaulted all around us. Liberal churches and theologians are undermining the Gospel by denying things like the divinity of Jesus. Friends, if Jesus wasn't God, he had no power to save. And they tell us that it doesn't matter what you believe; there are lots of paths to God; you just have to be sincere. But denying the divinity of Jesus—despite being one of the oldest heresies in the book—isn't just for liberals anymore. There are churches in our own community that fall under the broad evangelical label that

are following recent teaching coming out of a church in California that teaches that Jesus gave up his divinity when he became man. This is dangerous teaching. Again, if Jesus wasn't divine, he had no power to save. And there's still as much crass money-grubbing going on in today's Church as there was in Luther's time. If anything it may be worse. The "name-it-and-claim-it" teachers distract people from Jesus and put their attention on storing up treasures on earth while making obscene appeals for money—often to the people who can least afford it. A few years ago I got a letter from one of these televangelists asking me for "seed money". The promise was that whatever I gave, God would multiply ten-fold. This particular preacher is notorious for his wealth. Here I was struggling along as a bi-vocational priest in a tiny mission church. I wanted to write back and suggest that if things really work that way, perhaps he should exercise his faith and send my church some "seed money".

But perhaps what is most dangerous today is the more subtle thing we're seeing all over amongst "conservatives" and "evangelicals" and "orthodox" that downplays sin and pushes only the blessings associated with the Gospel. I listen to a lot of sermons each week thanks to the Internet. There are some really great men out there preaching the Gospel, but there are far too many—probably even a majority—out there who are afraid to talk about sin—because it might scare people away. And there are far too many out there who stand in the tradition of Luther, but who refuse to take a stand even as their sheep are led astray by false teaching in their own churches, by false teaching on T.V., and by so much of the garbage that it pushed today by the Christian publishing industry. Most Protestants see Martin Luther as a hero, especially so those of us who stand in the evangelical tradition he revived—and yet based on my own experience, it's safe to say that were Luther taking his stand for reformation in Canada today, he'd be condemned for rocking the boat, condemned for taking a stand for the Gospel and the truth of Scripture.

Brothers and sisters, the problem is that we're happy to know that someone *else* needs reform; but we don't like to admit that *we* need it ourselves.

Getting back to our Gospel lesson. When Jesus encouraged those believing Jews to abide in his Word and told them that to do so meant their freedom, there were other Jews there who were offended at the idea that Jesus was calling them slaves. They angrily responded to Jesus:

"We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

"We're Protestants; we're Evangelicals; we stand in the hallowed tradition of Martin Luther! We've already been reformed! How can you say that we still need reformation?" Brothers and sisters, all we need to do is to go back and look at what Luther and the Reformers were teaching and it's obvious what we've lost and how far we've fallen in five hundred years. The Gospel today reminds us not to be proud like those unbelieving Jews. The ironic thing is that as they were saying that they weren't slaves to anyone, Jesus probably could have pointed to Roman soldiers standing guard on the fringe of the crowd. They were slaves to their Roman conquerors. More importantly they were slaves to sin, but how could they see that if they couldn't see the even more obvious soldiers around them?

The truth is, brother and sisters, that the Church is always in need of reform and that you and I are always in need of reform because we're part of the Church—we stand under Jesus' call to abide in him and in his Word. We're tasked with preserving and holding to the faith once delivered to the saints. And yet there will always be someone or something calling us away from those things; downplaying the seriousness of our sins, cheapening the work of Jesus on the cross, throwing out the God of Scripture and replacing him with an idol of their own making, or appealing to the flesh and drawing our eyes away from

the kingdom in favour of earthly treasures that will not last.

Dear friends, if you would be free, *abide* in Jesus Christ and *abide* in his Word. Steep yourselves in it by study and meditation and memorisation. Be committed to a church that is just as committed to his Word and to preserving and teaching the faith that Jesus and his apostles taught us. Know the truth. But, brothers and sisters, be ready to defend the truth. When you see Christians straying from it, when you see teachers leading sheep away from it, remember that the work of reformation never ends and that each and every believer has a part in it. Let me close today with the final words the defense Luther made of his writings when he was called to recant them:

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason—for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves—I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen."