

Sermon for Theoasis Closing Worship
October 25, 2018
The Rev. R. Guy Erwin, Ph.D.
Text: 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.

Grace and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

"You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Every year I preach on this text for Reformation Sunday, and every year this statement rings out clear and loud and true and inspiring to me. It's easy to imagine the liberation Martin Luther found in a Gospel truth that took the fate of his troubled soul out of his own faltering powers and put it directly in the hands of God instead. How wonderful it is to hear again this morning of the power of truth to liberate us.

But this year, something is different. The text rings out as forcefully as ever, but we aren't in the same place as last year. Undistracted by the Reformation anniversary that preoccupied me last year, I feel as though I have woken up this year in another country—maybe even in another era. Truth—the truth that is supposed to set us free— just isn't what it used to be. Truth, today, is a concept under attack, challenged, relativized, bastardized into relative claims that are truth-like without actually being true.

As elusive as truth has always been, the regular and constant stream of obvious untruth that has become part of our public discourse has cost us even the abstract sense that seeking together after a truth all can recognize is no longer one of our goals—at least if power is your object. In that case it seems better to sow doubt, encourage fear, and stoke anger. To lie seems no longer to be a shameful thing; even being caught out publicly in a lie means hardly anything, in a post-shame world.

Pontius Pilate's question "What is truth?" has now been answered by thousands of TV political ads with "Whatever I say it is." And the lies most cleverly packaged and most often and emphatically repeated, grow in impact—in a world that is oddly credulous and skeptical at the same time.

In a post-truth, non-truth world, where is the freedom? Lost. What is there instead? Lies. Lies that enslave. Here's the corollary to Jesus' words I never thought about uttering before: Lies enslave us. A culture of lies is a culture of slavery and oppression, in which evil masquerades as virtue, and greed dresses up as the free market, and bigotry is disguised as

Christian faith. A culture of lies makes people think of themselves as victims, then exploits them in their victimhood and enslaves them to their fears.

Jesus might just as well have said: Lies will make you slaves. Why has this not been clearer to us? We have been so hopeful all these years—especially Americans, marinated in optimism and dreams of equality and opportunity. We have preferred to imagine that we were better than we are; we have looked on the bright side as our material wealth and personal agency and individual freedoms have grown. And we have overlooked the fear and anger felt among us by those who have heard the same promise that life would be better in every successive generation, but have not found that promise to be true for them. Some of us may share that resentment.

Martin Luther actually understood this better than I think we do. Luther was far less optimistic about the world and his fellow human beings than we are. He believed that the world was in the grip of the devil, the “Father of Lies,” who twisted human hearts and minds with fear and greed. Luther knew that he lived in a world of lies, a world he saw more clearly perhaps than we see our own. And the biggest lie of all—at least for Luther—was that some human beings held the power of salvation over others: specifically, that the church, though its penitential system and the power to forgive, literally held the keys to heaven in human hands, to be used for human purposes.

It was a reassuring lie, but it was a lie all the same—and Luther risked his life, and the wrath of those whose power lay in perpetuating and promoting the lie, by challenging it and calling it by its right name, and reducing its power to frighten and enslave. Most of us, raised in a 500 year old tradition of Lutheran theology and church life, have little appreciation of the great effort and risk involved in Luther’s challenge to what seemed like ancient, immutable, inherited truths, enshrined in centuries of structure and practice. Luther’s courage called forth from the world around him that ultimate question: “Who do you think you are?”

And of course Luther had his answer. Not that he was good enough, but that God was. The God he found in Scripture was a loving God, a self-giving God, even a suffering God. And a God whose promises were true and sure. This was a liberating truth so strong that it gave Luther courage to withstand a world full of lies. A liberating truth so convincing that when Luther gave it voice, it liberated not only him, but a generation, an era, a nation—half a continent—and today reaches around the globe, freeing people of their fear of not being good enough to be loved by God.

I used to think that the great lie of our time was that material things would make you happy, and that to organize our lives around our possessions was a great lie designed to make us captive to consumerism. I still believe that to some extent. But I am much more concerned with the fresher, bolder, less inhibited lie that is being promoted right now: that there is no real truth except what we want to be true. I am deeply offended by this lie, and for the first time in my life it frightens me that the lie grips my world so tightly.

Because no matter what we say, there is still truth. There is still a truth—this truth, the truth that Jesus speaks to the children of Abraham. It's a hard truth to hear, because to truly hear it we have to strip away all the lies we have used to hide and comfort ourselves, and we have to accept a truth we don't define, and which comes from outside of us.

But this is Jesus' truth: that God works apart from us, outside of us, even without us—to show us that God loves us. What is more, Jesus shows this truth to us not just in his words but in his person—in his life, and in his death. Jesus shows us a truth that is infinitely distant, yet intimately present for us in a human body—a body like ours, that could touch hurting people with tenderness but which could also be tortured and killed.

Jesus is the truth that passes all our understanding, but at the same time can be felt on our skin in a drop of baptismal water. Jesus is the truth far too big to comprehend, but that we can taste—as often as we do it—in a crumb of bread and a drop of wine. Jesus is the truth that is in us when we know—not like scholars know, but like children know—that we belong to God, and that nothing can separate us from God's love.

Love is the truth that overcomes the lies—the lies we tell ourselves, and the lies we tell each other. There is no abstract truth so convincing it can heal our broken hearts—only the intimate truth of being loved. Knowing we are loved does change everything: it puts us in a new place, in which we can be less afraid of each other and the storm around us. It really does free us, at least from our fear.

This is the freedom which Jesus promises: to break down the walls our fears have built around us—fear of not being enough; fear of failure; fear of being different; even the fear of not being loved. Jesus came into our midst as a human just like us, to show us that God loves us not because of who we are, but simply because we are: we are God's creation, God's image, God's children. This is what Jesus means. Amen.