

Every Sunday Is Reformation Sunday

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John 8:31-36

Will Willimon was, for many years, Dean of Duke University Chapel. While there, he interacted with some of the brightest undergraduates in the nation. Almost without exception, these students considered themselves wildly, irrepressibly free.

Willimon often began his freshman seminar by asking his bright-eyed students, "Are you free?"

"I was fortunate," said the typical college student. "My parents always gave me lots of freedom. They trusted me to make my own decisions. (Of course), I'm free."

Then Willimon would press his dagger home. "Would you have been free *not* to come to Duke? What would (your parents) have said if, upon completing high school, you had declared, 'I wish to spend my life working on Chevrolets'? Would you have been free to do *that*?"

The question produced an awkward silence followed by considerable squirming.

Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." But a lot turns on what you mean by freedom . . . and what you mean by truth.

This week marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, a theological and social revolution that began when a grumpy monk posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle

Church in Wittenberg, Germany. (I realize historians debate whether the nailing of the 95 theses to that church door actually happened, but some stories are too good not to be true!)

That monk, Martin Luther, didn't intend to start a succession movement from the Catholic Church. He intended to lead a reform from within. But in time, his bold assertions of *Sola Scriptura*--the authority of scripture above all--and salvation by grace through faith, led to fissures and divisions that continue to this day. And in many ways, those divisions form around the questions, "What is freedom?" "What is truth?" and "Who decides?"

Jesus' words, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," are among his most famous and enduring. It is not uncommon to see them emblazoned on posters and etched in stone above university doors. And many a young Turk, distancing him or herself from the parents' politics or religion, has appealed to this dictum: "I am only following the truth, wherever it leads!"

But read in context, Jesus' pronouncement, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free," is not about defiant adolescents standing atop their desks as in the movie, *Dead Poets Society*, crying, "O Captain, My Captain." It is about God's truth as revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Open the lens of your Bible reading app just a bit to take in the context of Jesus' immortal words. It begins with Jesus quarreling with some religious leaders over the nature of divine truth. Does such truth exist in religious rituals and rules, or in a dynamic, living relationship with the Father and Mother of us all? In that sense, it wasn't Luther who started the Reformation, but Jesus!

In all events, as this theological matching of wits comes to a close, we read that some folks believed in Jesus, and it is to *those* folk--"those who believe" (v. 31)-- that Jesus says, "*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.*" In other words, Jesus is not talking about truth in general, but the truth

comes through knowing him, the truth of God's faithfulness, love, and care. It is *that* confidence that can set you free. "And if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed!" (v. 6).

Now there are many things Luther and the other reformers got right. And a good number they got wrong: like turning their own religious and political ideologies into coercive belief systems meant to corral, rather than liberate, the conscience. Not to mention the rabid anti-Catholicism the Reformation unleashed in 16th century Europe that continues, in some quarters, to this very day.

But in making the scriptures the supreme authority in matters of faith, the reformers set off a revolution worthy of our gratitude and celebration. Because they called ordinary believers to hear and to heed Jesus' invitation, "If you continue in my word . . . You shall know my truth, and my truth shall set you free."

From the annals of the American Bible Society comes the story of a most unusual conversion. A missionary was standing on a street corner in Africa with a New Testament in hand. A man approached and asked if he might have the pocket New Testament. The missionary was glad to part with it, but curious about the man's motivation.

"Its pages are the perfect size for rolling cigarettes," the man confessed.

Impressed with the man's honesty, the missionary agreed to give him the New Testament under one condition: that he read every word on a page before he rolled it into a cigarette. The man agreed, and the deal was struck.

Years later, the missionary went to a revival preached by an African evangelist. Seeing the missionary in the audience, the evangelist sought him out after the service. "You don't remember me, do you?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not," the missionary answered. "Have we met before?"

"Yep," said the evangelist. "Fifteen years ago, you gave me a New Testament and made me promise to read every word on the page before I rolled a cigarette with it. It took me from

Matthew until the third chapter of John before I quit smoking the word and starting preaching it. That New Testament completely changed my life.”

Again and again, Jesus words have proved true: “If you continue in *my word*, you are truly my disciples.” Virtually every Reformation and renewal movement in Christian history was sparked by a return to the Bible: from the medieval monastic movement to the Great Awakening to M. L. King, Jr., calling our nation to racial justice by sounding the call of the Hebrew prophets.

Thus, we all owe a great debt to Martin Luther. He, more than any other figure, unchained the Bible from the church’s pulpits, first by translating it into the common language of the people, and then by hammering home the theological truth--the priesthood of all believers--that gave ordinary people the gumption to read the Bible for themselves. This theological revolution was also fueled by a technological revolution, the invention of the printing press, that made it possible to put a Bible in every person’s hand.

And yet here, we come face to face to face with the dark side of the Reformation: all the schism and division that resulted when each person started reading and interpreting the Bible for him or herself. By some estimates, there are 40,000 Christian denominations and sects in the world, because once you make the Bible the highest authority in matters of faith and practice, the question becomes, whose reading of the Bible shall reign supreme? The Pope’s? Luther’s? Calvin’s? Yours? Or mine?

And it is here that Baptists made their unique contribution. Because in balancing the twin demands of truth and freedom, Baptists were willing to risk a lot of freedom in the service of the truth. Instead of turning to state churches or ecclesiastic empires, or binding creeds to enforce uniformity of belief, Baptists settled on a free believer in a free church in a free land.

But the freedom they longed for and fought for was not the freedom to do whatever one pleased. It was the freedom to follow Jesus and to experience the fullness of God's bounty in him.

Carlyle Marney loved to tell the story of how various religious leaders address their congregations. The rabbi begins by saying, "Thus saith the Lord."

The Catholic priest begins by saying, "As the church has always taught."

The typical Protestant minister begins by announcing, "As the Bible says."

But when the Baptist preacher rises to speak, he or she says, "Now brothers and sisters, it seems to me."

Yes, today as in 16th century Europe, a lot turns on what is truth? And what is freedom? And who decides?

In an authentically Baptist church, the answer is we decide as before an open Bible, studied and shared in community, we seek the leading of the Spirit. Through just such a congregational conversation with the word of God, we discern the unique shape of God's calling in our place and time.

After all, it was Jesus who promised, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into a fuller grasp of my truth (John 16:12-13).

You've heard the saying, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." Well, Jesus makes that same promise. Only he calls the teacher, the Holy Spirit.

Thus, every Sunday is Reformation Sunday. Because God's word is a living word and Jesus is a living presence. So one can never quite know what new obstacle to God's grace and goodness Jesus will call us to tackle next.

My former church down in Macon, Georgia, just went through a difficult, but rewarding conversation about the full inclusion of gay persons in the life and witness of the church. To

their credit, they voted overwhelmingly to formalize what was already the church's practice: welcoming all, gay or straight, who want to follow Jesus.

Afterwards, a woman who has been a member of that church for over 60 years, confided to a minister, "Whew! This is the third time I've been through this: first it was blacks, then it was women, and now it is gays!" The implication of her remark seemed to be, "I don't know how many more of these revolutions my frail, feeble faith can stand."

But that is the cost of following Jesus: chasing after him in a desperate bid to catch up with God's always bold, venturesome grace.

"You shall know the truth," said Jesus, "and the truth shall set you free." But a lot turns on what you mean by truth and what you mean by freedom and who decides.

So yes, our debt to Martin Luther and the other Protestant reformers run deep. In their insistence on *Sola Scriptura*--the authority of scripture above all--and salvation by grace alone, they set in motion a theological revolution that continues to shape us to this very day.

But what is most important is not the various denominational brands that came out of that primordial theological soup. What matters most is the shared commitment to follow Jesus that unites all Christians, be they Catholics, Protestants, or Orthodox.

For when at long last, we are confronted with the fullness of God's mercy, all our differences will melt like wax candles dropped onto the face of the sun. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know in part; then we will know fully, even as we are fully known." (1 Cor. 13:12).

And so, Knollwood is Baptist by heritage but Christian by choice. To be sure, the Baptist heartbeat of a free Bible, a free church, a free believer, and religious liberty for all, beats steady and strong in this congregation. But we also draw from our wider Christian family in the way we worship, receive communion, recognize all baptisms, and join hands with other people of faith

in interfaith endeavors; like the recent refugee symposium we hosted or the Interfaith Habitat Build our church helped make possible.

And we participate in interfaith worship like our upcoming Community Thanksgiving Service where two of my colleagues--a Catholic priest and a Lutheran pastor--will share about all the things Catholics and Protestants hold in common. Because this church decided long ago, as our founding pastor Dr. Jack said it, "If Jesus emphasized it, we'll emphasize it. But if Jesus didn't think it was important, than neither shall we."

So on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, let's covenant to hear and heed anew Jesus' call: "If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

Not just any truth, but the truth of God's welcoming, liberating love, made concrete and real, touchable and human, in the man from Nazareth. *That* is that truth, above every other, that will set you free.

O holy Christ, thank you for those in the Reformation--and others before and since--who taught us to love your word. And in loving your word, to love you. And in loving you, to love our neighbor. In the Name above every name, even your own, we make our prayer. Amen.

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