

John 8:31-36. Reformation Sunday 2013.

“The truth will set you free.” Where have you heard, or seen, those words?

- You’ll hear them in speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.
- I’ve seen pictures of them inscribed at the CIA building.
- They have made it to the “big screen” / movies.
- I’ve heard them cited by talk show hosts.

These words are also posted across the internet: “The truth will set you free.” If you go searching, though, be warned: much used, they have been much abused.

One person went so far as to ask: “What does this phrase mean to you?” Encouragingly, some responses to the internet post pointed the questioner right back to the Bible. But others replied like this:

- “I have always taken the saying to mean: what we believe is true to ourselves; by accepting this, our mind will be free from conflict, we will be at peace with ourselves” &
- “...‘the truth will set you free’ is a relative term. Things are not always as they appear; it’s a matter of perception.”

Copied, printed, broadcast, posted – these words are heard round the world in our day: “the truth will set you free.” We are not here today to ask: What do you think these words mean? We will listen to Jesus, the author of these words. Delivered in the temple courts, they have been recorded and preserved for us. We, Lutherans, often ask: “What does this mean?” The binding of Bibles cracking open is the response. The answer is right here [Bible] – for here is God’s Word; here is the truth straight from God’s own mouth.

Read vs.31-32. 31 *To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

Not multiple truths, like multiple choice where many answers are possible. (People’s misquotes often imply that.) Jesus points us one direction: hold to his teaching - the one truth - God’s. This is it [the Bible]. Believe what you read and hear from this book. “Then you know the truth. And the truth will **set** you **free**.”

But free from what? There is a menacing force which – at the start – enslaves us.

Read vs.33-34. 33 *They answered Jesus, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" 34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.*

Worse than physical slavery, Jesus is talking about spiritual slavery.

Many people who heard Jesus that day raised their objection to this. They didn’t want to hear it. They thought more highly of themselves than that. They had their own ideas of how to be free from sin. Many trusted in their own works. They pointed to their descent from Abraham, who had a close relationship with the Lord. As if that automatically placed them in good standing with God.

Things haven’t changed. People continue to object to God’s truth. Spiritual lies, falsehoods & deceptions continue to enslave precious souls. Some deny their sin altogether. Others believe in their own ability to

free themselves. Some rely on their family's good standing in a church, or their record of being good church goers. But as long as they cling to their own ideas, they remain enslaved.

It has been said: "The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable" (James Garfield). There's a spiritual nugget to take away from that.

The law of God must make sad, must pry the fingers of our heart loose from all pride & all notions of self-remedy for sin's curse. God, in grace, has brought you – brought me – to confess and hold to this truth. "No one is right in God's sight by obeying his law. When we look at God's law, we see how many times we've sinned" (Romans 3:20). And there is no way to free ourselves.

Luther once described his spiritual slavery like being boxed in by four walls. Wall #1 – God is holy and hates sin. Wall #2 – I am a sinner. Wall #3 – the wages of sin is death. Wall #4 – God must condemn me.

At one time, that's all that Martin Luther knew. And he was terrified and tortured by such thoughts. But God placed Luther in a position as professor, tasked with teaching the Bible. And as Luther read and studied God's Word, the Holy Spirit brought him to know and believe: Jesus saves!

The Holy Spirit was also at work on the day Jesus spoke these words in John ch.8. Many objected. But there were others this day who "even as Jesus spoke, put their faith in him" (vs.30).

Let's hear the good news: Jesus saves! Hear Jesus himself teach us this:

Read vs.35-36. *35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

"If **the Son** sets you free..." No one else can set you free. Nothing else can set you free.

From the very first promise, on the heels of the very first sin, God made this gospel truth clear: To the devil, in the Garden of Eden, God said: "**He** will crush your head." There is no part for us to carry out. In fact, do you notice: no one else is mentioned? Only He - the promised Savior. The rest of the Old Testament Scriptures testified to the same One.

Now He, God's one and only Son, spoke: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

The Son died to set you free from death. The Son suffered hell to set you free from sin's curse. The Son freed himself from the grave – he, the Son of God, could not be held in by death. He is the One who promises you: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed – forever!"

This is God's gift. You heard it earlier in Romans ch.3: "It comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:22).

Freed from sin. Free from guilt. Freed from the fear of death. Freed from hell. Free to live forever. Free to live out our thanks, to offer our praise, to serve our God, and to hold to His teachings.

Martin Luther was filled with such relief – such joy – such appreciation... he dedicated his life to the One who loved him so much. He wanted the truth that set him free to be told. Martin wanted the truth of Jesus to get out to others, even if it meant a tortuous death for him. It was well known... others who had stood up for God's truth in this way had been staked against a pole, set on fire, and martyred. That was the underlying threat, as Martin stood before the Emperor and representatives of the Roman Catholic Church

in 1521. He had written pamphlets and books containing the news: Jesus saves. Trust in him alone. Asked if he would take back what he had written, he said that he would not – he could not – unless he could be shown from the Bible that what he had taught was in error.

In the years that followed, he translated the Bible into the language of the people. More and more heard God's truth as it was printed & as it was preached. Many put their faith in Jesus.

A group of German princes were among them. They took their stand before the Emperor in 1530 at the city of Augsburg. They stuck out their necks, and proclaimed the news of the One who loves us, and who frees us from our sins by his own blood.

“When the Emperor, after entering Augsburg, stubbornly demanded that the Lutherans cease preaching, Margrave George of Brandenburg finally declared: ‘Rather than deny my God and suffer the Word of God to be taken from me, I will kneel down and have my head struck off’” (Concordia Triglotta, Historical Introduction to the Symbolic Books, p.23).

Martin Luther preached on this chapter – ch.8 – of the Gospel of John a year after that meeting of the Emperor and princes in Augsburg. Listen in for a moment:

...here is the truth: Christ will truly make you free—not in a physical manner, but He will free you from sin. Here Christ wants to state: “I am not a beggar preacher who [preaches about] paltry things, such as [earthly] riches, honor, might, and pleasures.” For all these are nothing but [pig] dung and filth... But Christ is speaking here about true, eternal, and spiritual freedom. ¹

With that in mind, Luther gave some very practical advice of how well spent our time is today: “This is a message to be preached again and again.” Why? One reason is: This truth is powerful when death approaches, when the devil speaks to you and says, “You’re mine. Your sin deserves the hell that waits for me too. See you there, sorry soul!”

We hear, we learn, we take to heart Jesus’ words to us today ... so that when death approaches ... and the devil snaps at us with his lies, we can defend ourselves: “The Son sets me free. I place my confidence in him. I know and trust the truth he has spoken to me in His Word. He has freed me from my sin, at the cost of his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. I am his own, and will live with him in his kingdom forever.”

Another very practical reason to hear and treasure up these truths in our hearts is: We don’t know if in the future our physical liberties will be snatched from us, or from our children in their lifetime, for holding to the truth of God.

What will be our comfort and strength then? Jesus’ words to us today prepare us, strengthen us, for just such a time. For our Savior’s truth to us is: “Though they may lock you up, they cannot take from you the freedom I give you. If they put you to death, they cannot take your life, for you – my child – have the eternal life which I have given you.”

Indeed, if the Son sets you free, you will be free. Indeed, the truth will set you free.

May God give us strength to always hold to His teachings! Amen.

¹Luther, M. (1999, c1959). Vol. 23: *Luther's works, vol. 23 : Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Jn 8:39). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.