

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we hear these very familiar words of Jesus:

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31b-32)

I think I can safely say that we all know the truth of this passage...but the bigger question is, do we KNOW the truth of this passage?

One of the most revered and influential professors for me in my time as a student at Millersville was Dr. William Smith. Dr. Smith was at that time the head of the philosophy department and it was his passion for this subject that inspired me to major in philosophy. One of Dr. Smith's quips that he would express before midterms or final exams was, "You may have the correct answers in your exam booklets, you may have all the correct words in place...but I'll know if you know the answer." I was fortunate enough to get to know Dr Smith on a personal level after I graduated and I can say that he was *not* a devout Christian man but he is a man of sincere respect and remarkable integrity, so I don't think he would mind me setting up this sermon with his words..."I'll know if you'll know."

Today, we celebrate within our worship to God, the official start of the Lutheran Reformation. Legend has it that on October 31, 1517 Luther posted his *95 Theses* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This piece of paper containing the 95 revolutionary opinions would become what we know today and celebrate as the Protestant Reformation. Then, some three-and-a-half years later we find Luther at the center of the Diet of Worms in April 1521. Historically a Diet is a legislative assembly in certain countries. Specifically, the Diet of Worms in 1521 was an imperial assembly of the Holy Roman Empire called by Emperor Charles V. At this assembly the Emperor Charles V banned Luther's writings and declared him a heretic and an enemy of the state and demanded Luther to recant...Luther is to say before the Diet that he no longer holds the opinion or the belief that he has proclaimed in all his writings. In other words, the Emperor Charles V along with Pope Leo wanted Luther to deny what he knows about the truth and go back on his word. It is believed that it was in this assembly also that Luther stood steadfast in God's Word and proclaimed his famous line, *Here I stand*. Luther knew God's Word very well and this is what troubled the Emperor and the Pope because they knew he knew God's Word and knew very well.

We just finished singing our Hymn of Praise which is one of my favorite prayers from Luther and it is a prayer that I have not only sung many times, it is a prayer that I have prayed many times as well. We all just prayed for the Lord to...

...keep us steadfast in your word;
curb those who by deceit or sword
would wrest the kingdom from your Son
and bring to nought all he has done. (LBW 230, ELW 517)

Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word...Lord, keep us resolutely or dutifully firm and unwavering in your Word. What we are praying for is to remain in a relationship with that Word that is our Lord Jesus Christ. We are praying for the very thing Jesus is contesting in this Gospel lesson

today. Jesus is challenging those who *say* or who claim they know the Word or they believe in that Word, but they are acting as if they do not know the Word. Being in relationship is more than knowing...it's being one with the Word and the Lord knows if we know.

In our Gospel lesson today, we are in a section of John that is very polemical because Jesus at this point in this Gospel of John is strongly critical of the Jews that say they believe in Jesus as the way and the truth. He is also challenging the theological differences between him and the religious leaders. Jesus is addressing those who John refers to as "Jews" meaning, anyone who may oppose Jesus or reject Him as the Messiah.

But at the same time, Jesus is also addressing...those then and now who "say" they believe in him but act as if they don't. And this is where we are all drawn into the teaching of Jesus in this passage. By this very Word before us today we are being challenged. We all say with our mouths that we believe or that we abide in the Word, and we all "know" that Jesus Christ is the way and the truth, but our hearts direct our actions and our actions may indicate that this may not be so. By this very Word before us today we may find that perhaps we are a bit of a fair-weather-Christian...the Christian who knows how to be "A" Christian but has no clue on how to BE Christian.

Are we the type of Christian who remains or abides in the Word until we are confronted with our own crosses? And when we are confronted with our crosses, do we abandon that "Word" by claiming that IT abandoned us?

There are a series of sermons that Luther preached in Wittenberg from November 5, 1530 to March 9, 1532. In these expositions of the sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters of the Gospel of St. John, Luther explains this type of Christian when preaching on:

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

In his sermon on this verse Luther says this:

Many hear the Gospel and remain with it for utilitarian reasons. They reap money, goods, and honor from it. My dear friends, who would not like that!

However, says Luther:

There are few who remain true to the Gospel in the face of the cross and persecution.

I know (says Luther) that it is easy to believe in the beginning. But where are those who remain steadfast, who persevere, endure, and say: "Let come whatever God send me! If I am not to be well, then I am satisfied to be sick.

If I am not rich, that I shall be content to remain poor. Whether I live or die, I shall remain with Christ."

Luther then makes this observation:

Fidelity to Christ's doctrine is rare, especially when people encounter an evil wind. To be sure, many become Christians and hold firmly to the Gospel at first; but then they abandon it like these (that Jesus is addressing in this passage).¹

Simply put, we all who confess a faith in the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...we all love this God when things go our way and life is good, until we are confronted with our crosses and things are not good at all, how then does that Triune God look...how then, is this God reflected in the actions of our hearts? Do our actions become the fruit of our habits or the fruit of our faith?

But even as Luther is confronted with his own challenges of faith, he went further in his thoughts and his struggles with his faith and the church and wrote them out in the form of 95 various theses. He did so because Christians at that time had developed a rich and diverse set of answers and responses to questions of how theology should be pursued. Luther looked at all these answers critically in light of the Word of God in Scripture, and he felt uncomfortable with the dominant scholastic theology of his own day.² And I truly believe that if Luther were alive today he would probably feel the same, if not worse because we have not remained in the Word, we have taken the Word of God and theologically twisted it to our favor.

We all claim to be a sinner and we do so very boldly and very proudly. This however, is simply self-justification. Repentance is not repentance because we say it out loud, while our actions continue as they are. There is no change, no true repentance when we go about our way NOT in God's Word but steadfast in our own way or our own understanding of a theology based on our opinions and NOT God's Word.

The first five of Luther's ninety-five theses posted on the door of the cathedral dealt with the external systems in the church that pacify a Christian's self-justification. In the first five of his ninety-five theses Luther is addressing those who feel that attending a church or participating in the sacramental life of a Christian assembly is abiding in God's Word. But Luther in the first five theses, like Jesus today in our Gospel lesson today, is challenging us by asking, what good is our faith in this building and our actions in this assembly if our faith, based in God's Word, is not put into action outside of these walls?

The first three of Luther's theses are this:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.
3. Yet it does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward mortification of the flesh.³

¹Jaroslav Pelikan, (editor), Daniel Poellot (assistant Editor). *Luther's Works Volume 23, Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957. Pages 392-393. Parenthetical phrase are my words, Luther actually wrote, "Fellows in our text" when referring to the Jews and religious authority that Jesus is addressing.

² Lull, Timothy F., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989. Part I: The Task of Theology, page 7.

³ Ibid. page 21.

Luther is more or less saying...don't just go to church to be "A" Christian, go to church and go from church to BE Christian...live out repentance. What is it then that guides us and leads us as we go about our lives within our culture today? Listen once again to the Words of the prophet Jeremiah:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:33b-34)

God has blessed us with the gift of His Word Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, God has written that Word on our hearts and in this act, God has established His relationship with us. We in turn manifest that relationship in the relationships we build with one another. As we go from this assembly may we keep in mind that the relationship we have with God does not destroy us, it builds us up. The relationship we have with God does not discourage us, it encourages us, strengthens us, persuades us, and inspires us and this all becomes manifest when we truly do the same with one another. Yes we all know this but do we know it?

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31b-32)

This Holy Word, written in our hearts, is our relationship with God, it is the same Word that sets us free from sin and death. The power of truth, the power of grace and forgiveness, and the power of salvation are unknowable apart from the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ. May this Holy Word be our refuge and strength, may it be a very present help in trouble.

So, the question before us today is, how then do we remain or abide in God's Word? Before we answer that, remember there will be a test at the end of our "semester" and "THE PROFESSOR" will know if we know. But the Good News for us today is that this professor doesn't grade on a curve, HE grades on a cross through Jesus Christ and sends us in that body to be that same grace.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.