

“Be reformed, be free!” (John 8:31-36)

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

We call ourselves Lutherans. Lutheran church. Today we celebrate 496th anniversary of Lutheran Reformation. For some it may seem just an event in history, some haven't even heard much about it. However, this very event changed the course of entire world. Entire world, not just Germany, or not just Western countries.

The wonderful world where we live today, with all the advances in social welfare, education, medicine, human rights, technology, science, etc., is to a large extent a product of the Reformation.

Most of the people have heard the name of Dr. Martin Luther. Few know who he was. Even fewer know that we can rightly consider him a true messenger of God. Already century before the Reformation, a prophesy was said about Luther by other reformer - Jan Huss.

More prophesies were delivered along the way. I will read only one, which were revealed on the night of 30th October in 1517 to Elector of Saxony Frederick as he related it to his brother John. It happened the night before Luther posted his famous 95 thesis against papal doctrine of indulgences to the doors of Wittenberg church.

“I fell asleep again, and dreamed the Almighty sent me a monk, who was a true son of Paul the apostle. He was accompanied by all the saints, in obedience to God's command, to bear him testimony, and to assure me that he did not come with any fraudulent design, but that all he should do was conformable to the will of God.

They asked my gracious permission to let him write something on the doors of the palace-chapel at Wittenberg, which I conceded through my chancellor. Upon this, the monk retired and began to write... The pen he used was so long that its extremity reached as far as Rome, where it pierced the ears of a lion which lay there, and shook the triple crown on the Pope's head.

[...] The Pope called upon us to oppose this monk, and addressed himself particularly to me, because the friar was living in my dominions... I then dreamt that all the princes of the empire, and we along with them, hastened to Rome, and endeavored one after another to break this pen; but the greater our exertions the stronger it became... we gave it up as hopeless. [...] On a sudden I heard a loud cry; from the monk's long pen had issued a host of other pens."

This revelation to large extent granted Luther Frederick's protection, for he trusted that what Luther was doing was the work of Almighty Himself. That he was sent by God. Luther's friends and colleagues used to call him "great teacher, prophet of Christ, reformer sent by God, holy apostle, even an angel from Rev 14:6-7."

Today we celebrate the 496th anniversary of the Reformation, and we can't talk about the Reformation apart from the great reformer. What was so special about what Luther did? How did ideas and work of one man could change the course of entire world?

Because these were never His ideas. Never. It was never about Luther himself. He was very upset when his followers where called Lutherans. He wasn't writing His own ideas. The cause of these incredible changes was not a man Luther, but, as we heard in Frederick's prophesy, the words he was writing.

And these words always were about other man. It was always about Christ Jesus. The one who was begotten from the Father before the creation of the world, the one who was born from the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate...

... was crucified, dead and buried, who descended in hell, who on the third day rouse from the dead and ascended into heaven, where He sits at the right hand of God the Father, the one who comes to us in His word and sacraments. The one who did it all for us. For you. It was always about the Lord Jesus Christ ... for us.

Luther rediscovered what was lost. The power of the word of God. He rediscovered that true God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is God who speaks, God of conversation, who does everything by His holy and powerful word.

He created by the word, He sustains this world by His word and He saves us by His word, when He speaks to us. When He speaks His eternal will, His holy law, and His unchanging attitude, His Gospel.

The word of God reveals us the truth about God, about us and about this world. The word of God changes our hearts and wills, when we find out about His love, and then we are enabled to live new lives as children of God.

By God's grace Luther was able to open and explain the word of God as clearly as never before since the time of apostle Paul.

Today we read the Gospel of John, words of Jesus about what it means to be His disciple. These words explain wonderfully what was Luther's rediscovery. "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (2x)

In Luther's time the Church had gone astray and had lost the message she was sent to bring to all nations. Instead, people were taught what they were supposed to do to merit God's grace.

Some of these instructions corresponded to God's commandments at least somehow, but majority of them were purely human inventions. Pilgrimages, fasting, indulgences, relics, and so on. The Church had lost the Gospel, it had become just one more religion.

However, at that time almost everyone accepted the fact that God had created this world, that we are His creatures, that He is going to evaluate His creation. If you know that God is going to judge His creation, that He is going to judge you, to evaluate how you have lived your life, if you realize that you have fallen short according to His standards, you will do everything to make it up.

Thus why in so many occasions church officials misused this situation, turning people's desire for forgiveness into money machine for Rome.

Almost everyone was struggling with the question how to stand before God as the ultimate judge. What can I do to merit His favor, should I pray to all saints and Jesus Mom Mary, should I pay more to see more relics, to fast more, to confess more sins, to buy more indulgences. What should I do?

Consciences of many were in torture and despair. How can I, a hopeless sinner, stand before Holy God? He knows my heart... even if I'm perfect in my performance, my heart is full of sinful and shameful passions. I know it and He knows it even better.

It doesn't matter how much you do, how hard you try, we can't get good conscience by what we do. Why? Because as soon as we read God's commandments, as soon as we understand His holy will, it shows us how impossible it is for us, to live that way.

Loving our God more than anything, and our neighbors as ourselves. Nice words... nice commands... however... it is us, that we want to love more than anything. Ourselves.

This was also Luther's struggle. How can I stand before holy God, when even I myself know that there is nothing good in me? By God's grace He was encouraged to look not at what he does, how he performs, but at what God has done and does for us. To look at Christ.

Luther found an answer not somewhere else, but in words of God. "The righteous shall live by faith." (Rom 1:17) "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph. 2:8-9)

It is the sweetest message for ears of one, who is struggling with the questions, how can I stand before the Christ, when He returns in His glory? Of course, He knows everything about me. Just imagine if your thoughts would be displayed on the screen during the service... where would you run? Where would you hide? And they all will be displayed before God, when He returns... what then?

How sweet then is Gospel that "we know that no one is justified by trying to do good works, by trying to justify themselves, but through faith in Jesus Christ." (Gal 2:16) Trusting that what Jesus did, He did also for you. For you, personally.

When the Holy Spirit assures us that Jesus really took upon Himself MY sins, that they are done away, punishment is received, nothing is left, that because what Jesus has done I have free access to God, without fear, as His beloved child, this message changes everything.

It gives us a good conscience before God, it frees us to live focusing not ourselves, but on others. It changes hearts, it changes lives, it changes the world. That's what happened in the Reformations. As Luther rediscovered this message of Christ, it changed hearts and changed the world.

Luther didn't do anything, he just dwelled in Jesus' words. Trying to understand what God is speaking to us. Reading the Bible from cover to cover twice every year. It was given to him to grasp this message, to preach it, to teach it, to write it...

These words were so big that they shook corrupted Rome and no one could stop them. For they were words of Jesus. Words of God. His message. His truth. And truth set them free, free to change this world for better.

Today is 21st century. Five centuries after the Reformation. And we desperately need a reformation again. Desperately. But what is this reformation, we may ask. It is better to understand it from the opposite, that is – deformation. Reformation is restoring something back to its goodness. Removing all corruption, all distortions.

That is exactly what Luther did restoring the Biblical message that we are justified, that we are reconciled with God only by grace of God, only through faith, only by the Word of God, only through Christ.

The Gospel of God's grace and comforting message that because of what Jesus Christ did, our sins are forgiven and we are made children of God the Father and His heirs in our baptism, - this message was like an overflowing, life giving spring which enabled the Church and the world to flourish and to bring forth rich and abundant fruits.

We have inherited many blessings that the Reformation gave to the Church and to humanity, but we have managed to distort and to misuse most of them. Today we look at these fruits, we enjoy them and we think that they are results of our own efforts and achievements. We have forgotten that they came into this world through the most-powerful word of God. His Gospel.

Jesus said that "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The Jews knew that there is the truth. They didn't know that the truth was a person, standing before them. They also didn't realize how serious was sin, that the Son of God had to die to save us.

At Luther's time, people knew that there is the truth, they knew that Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), but again they had forgotten how serious is sin, they thought that they can save themselves, that they just need a little help from the Holy Spirit. They had forgotten that it required the life of Jesus to overcome sin and death.

Today we have gone much further. So many people, who call themselves Christians, don't believe that there is the truth. Moreover, they don't believe that Jesus is the truth and the way... the only way to salvation.

Even more, so many believe that the Gospel is just one of religions, one of spiritual paths, and everyone can choose whatever pleases them. Something that would suit to your taste, to your preferences.

So many don't believe there is such a thing as sin, and consequently, there is no need for a savior. Message of Jesus for them is just one more way to feel good, to feel happy, to satisfy their own spiritual needs.

We need a reformation. We desperately need a reformation. We need the truth that will make us free. Today people think that they are free. Free as never before. Free to do whatever pleases them. They can proudly cry together with the Jews: "We have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

Free? Indeed? True freedom is when we rejoice in peace living such a life for which we are created. With joy and gratitude receiving everything from God, our daily bread, meaning and purpose for our lives, security for tomorrow, and with joy and passion serving others with all we have received.

We are free when we know who we are, created in the image of God, infinitely important in His eyes, yes, sinners, yes, redeemed sinners, redeemed by God Himself. Made members of His family.

But today, where do we look for joy, for meaning, for security, for our worth? What do we believe to be the truth? That the highest goal and meaning in our life is to live for myself and to be happy? That true joys comes when we get or try everything we can imagine? Or that our worth depends of our achievements? That future security lies in having saved enough?

This is not a freedom. This is what Jesus calls slavery. To hope that by striving hard for all those things we can obtain ...what only true God can give us. True joy, true meaning, true fulfillment, true security and true freedom.

We need a reformation that would reveal us truth and would give us true freedom. Jesus brought it to us. Apostles proclaimed it. Luther rediscovered it. They rejoice in it and were happy to sacrifice their lives so that only we can learn about it. Wherever people accepted it, they were made free, not just to live free, but to make others free and to change this world.

We need this power, that can do these incredible things, change hearts and change lives. And, in fact, we already have it. The Word of God. It's here. Never before in the history of the world the Word of God has been so accessible to us. If only we abide in Jesus words... reading, meditating upon them, studying them, praying for God's wisdom, sharing them, helping others with them, changing with them our lives and lives of our neighbors.

If only we accept words of Jesus as the truth, as the words of God, spoken to us. To you! By God, to you. They call you home, they reform you, they give you a new heart and a new life, they make you wise and understanding, they make you free, make you strong, compassionate, they give you joy, meaning, purpose, dignity, they allow you to live in peace. They give you eternal life with our Creator.

As we speak, Jesus is speaking to you, just let Him reform you, just let Him make you free. Abide in His words and He and His Father will abide with you.
Amen.