

“Abide in my words” John 8:31-36

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” 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’?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Many things are better seen from the distance. Especially when it comes to something great. The same is true about historical events. Especially about great and the course of entire civilization changing events.

They most certainly are better seen and appreciated from the distance. Today we remember one of them – the Lutheran Reformation. The genius of Luther’s theology was so powerful that it literary reshaped the landscape of Western civilization.

No wonder that many of his contemporaries believed that Dr Martin Luther was one of the angels mentioned in Revelation 14, the angel with “an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.” (Rev 14:6)

The West is like it is today, with multiple blessings, the best society to live in that has ever existed, and all of that to great extent because of the many ideas and movements that begun as the Lutheran Reformation strived to proclaim the pure and clear Gospel message to all the nations. That’s why we have what we have, and not because we and our contemporaries are so smart...

The power of the Gospel has indeed changed the face of the world in which we live. From the distance we can see the influence of the Reformation and how Luther’s ideas have reshaped both the Church and the society.

It looked very different through the eyes of Luther himself. Living as an outlaw. Always in the midst of spiritual battles. At the end of his life he was so disappointed with what was happening in his congregation in Wittenberg, so gutted that the fruits of the Gospel were not seen among the people of Wittenberg, that he wrote to his beloved wife Kathy that he didn’t want to return to that place anymore.

Today we can marvel together with historians and theologians – how could the ideas of the Lutheran Reformation be so powerful and their impact so far reaching?! What gave them such power to change the world?

And this is what we will briefly reflect on this evening. So, how could that happen? And the answer is rather simple. Because of the focus of the Lutheran Reformation.

What were they interested in? Were they interested in changing the world? Were they dreaming about creating the West as we know it today? Not at all...

Their focus was on the Word of God. On the Bible. On the Gospel. That's where one of the Reformations slogans comes from – “the Scripture alone”. And perhaps that explains also the Gospel choice for this day, the reading from John 8.

“Abide in my words... then you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” This is what the Reformers did. They abided in the Word, they delved deep into the Word, they searched the Scripture daily.

As it was so well summarized in the Book of Concord, “We receive and embrace with our whole heart the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged.”

If only we loved and sought the Word of God as the Reformers did. But, how often do we do that... They abided in the Word, they listened to God and that shaped their understanding about the two of the most important questions that there are. Who is God? And who are we as human beings?

So, who is God? How does the abiding in the Word shaped the Reformers understanding about God? Luther realized that our God is God who speaks. God who does everything by speaking. Think Genesis 1, or the Gospel according John 1, or Colossians 1, or Proverbs 8... think creation!

How was it done? God spoke and things came into being. How is it done today? God still speaks and that is His powerful Word that holds everything together. That is His powerful Word that bring forth life and sustains it... every minute, every second.

But God's speaking is not limited with the creation. He is God the Creator, but He is also ... God our Redeemer. How does He save us? That's right, by speaking. But how does He do it? And this is another cool thing that was revealed to Luther.

Our God is the Creator even as He is our Redeemer. His work of salvation is also His work of creation. He speaks and by His speaking He makes us a new creation. First, He destroys our old self-centered selves, rebellious and foolish as we are, when He speaks His Law to us.

But then He creates new hearts in us, and He puts a new Spirit in us, as He speaks to us His life-giving Gospel. To become the new creation, – this is not something we can do on our own, it is the work of the Creator. But how does He do it?

We know that God speaks to us in His written Word, in the Bible. But He also speaks today using His favorite creatures, that is, us. When we speak the message from our God, God's Law and His Gospel, even as we put it in our own word, these are not

our human words only. Our God speaks through us. Our words then are also His words. That's Him speaking with us, calling us to Himself. And His Words are not simply words. They are the Spirit and life.

The Holy Spirit always accompanies God's speaking, even if it is done through us. Remember this beautiful image, – the Word of God and the Spirit of God are like to arms of God the Father, and that's how He embraces us.

But what is striking, that our speaking God uses us, imperfect as we are, both to speak His Word and also to send forth His Spirit. We are indeed jars of clay that contain this divine treasure – the Gospel.

But the surpassing power doesn't belong to us, it belongs to God. We are His messengers, His coworkers in His mission to bring forth the New Creation, perfect in its goodness. What an honor!

But there is more. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will dwell with us and in us. Beloved disciple of Jesus, John, speaks about it in his first letter. He writes: "But our fellowship is with the Father and the Son." Paul writes to Corinthians: "Don't you know that you are the Temple of the Holy Spirit?"

When our God speaks to us, be it through His written Word or through His people, what happens is not simply an exchange of information. Sure, He informs and forms and shapes us by His Word, but He also embraces us in this divine fellowship with Himself. He opens the loving communion within Trinity and invites us in.

This fellowship is so much more than we can comprehend. The very source of life indwells in us as we abide in His Word, and you are included into the internal life of the Trinity. For now, we can only marvel about what it means, but the day comes when what is now only spoken about, you will see and experienced in its fullness.

This much about how abiding in the Word shaped Luther's understanding of who our God is. It indeed helped him to know the truth, the truth about our God, that He is our gracious Creator and Redeemer, who does everything not because we deserve it, but unconditionally, out of His own divine goodness and mercy.

We are simply to receive the care and the gifts of our God trusting in Him as our Loving Father. That's where the other slogans of the Reformation come from: everything is given to us "by grace alone", and we can receive it "in faith alone".

Thus, the abiding in Word transformed the Church, to great extent purifying it from different false teachings and idolatries and setting people free to enjoy the fellowship with true God with joy and gratitude.

But as we mention before, abiding in the Word also helped Luther to see differently who we are as human beings. As he put it, we are wonderfully made to live in two kinds of relationships. With our God the Creator and Redeemer, and with other

fellow human beings and the creation in the broadest sense. And what an abundant and beautiful life it is! As the abiding in the Word taught Luther, our relationships with our God are receptive relationships.

He doesn't need anything from us. That is Him, who graciously and abundantly gives us everything needed for our body and soul. As our Creator He daily and richly provides our daily bread, and everything that we need for this body and life.

As our Redeemer, He forgives all our sins, reconciles us with Himself, and offers the gift of eternal life. As the Holy Spirit, He creates in us new hearts, He creates our faith, our trust in Him, He reshapes us to be more and more like Jesus.

Our relationships with our God are receptive, or we could say passive relationships. But then in our relationships with fellow humans and with the creation, we are created to be active givers. We are created to continue God's work of creation and ordering of creation. We are created to be His coworkers in our many vocations.

Another word for our vocations is our places of responsibility. Thus, abiding in the Word Luther discovered that instead of offering our God our self-chosen good works, which in fact didn't benefit anyone, we are called to serve Him by serving our neighbors, that is, all those people whom God has placed in our lives.

This break-through understanding about who we are as human beings changed everything. Instead of retreating from God's creation and society, Christians were free to embrace the life in this world and care for their neighbors in all our ordinary responsibilities – in marriage, in family, at work – as in God pleasing sacred callings.

And again, this understanding changed not only the Church, but entire society. For the truth about who we are as human beings, set people free to live lives for which we were created, that is – receiving everything from the Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and then serving with everything to our neighbors.

“Abide in my Word...” For that's where the truth and the life and the power and the wisdom are. Not hidden, but prepared for us. To transform you, to make you a new creation, and to help you to experience the joy of living with your God already now.

Besides, remembering the Reformation serves us also as an encouragement. How? We are heirs of the Lutheran Reformers. We have received the same pure message that they were blessed to rediscover. And that message hasn't grown weaker.

It is as powerful and life-transforming as it was five centuries ago. The world may seem to sink in spiritual darkness, but as long as we abide in the Word and boldly and winsomely confess the truth of Christ, we will be true disciples and the truth will keep setting people free.

And today in our society people need to hear our God speaking to them as much as ever. For today the truth and true freedom are in a very short supply. Therefore, let's

abide in the Word, let's be embraced and strengthened by the Divine Fellowship and let's remain the beacons of truth.

And even if it seems that today the spiritual darkness descends on the West, if only we abide in the Word, who knows how this time will look from the distance. Happy Reformation Day, Brothers and Sisters!

Amen.