

“If you abide... you will be free!” John 8:31-36

“So, 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.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Reformation Day! The Lutheran Reformation... Reflect on this for a moment – what emotions, attitudes, what thoughts the remembering of that magnificent event, of that magnificent era invoke in you? What does it mean for you?

That is true, we are at least by name the heirs of those courageous, God-fearing and faithful men and women whom five centuries ago God used to do something truly remarkable and epoch changing. They sacrificed so much, they suffered so much.

Just think about Dr Martin Luther, how strange are the ways of our God! He drove Luther into despair through His super-sensitive conscience. He comforted and overjoyed him by revealed to Luther His life-giving Gospel.

Then God squeezed him through external pressures. The Holy Spirit burned Luther with the passion to stand for the Gospel truth. He was declared to be outside the law, condemned by the church’s leaders, attacked by theologians from Rome from one side, and by the radical reformation from other.

Living through wars and plagues and suffering from sicknesses, experiencing the death of his own children, being abandoned and denounced by his own colleagues; that was quite a journey. Through all that adversity and agony our God managed to bring to the world the purest, the most beautiful teaching of the Gospel.

That Gospel message gave birth to what we today know as Lutheran Church. But I wonder, which side are we today? Are we more like that church passionately striving for pure life-giving doctrine, standing firmly rooted in the Word of God, ready to suffer rather than compromise on what God’s Word reveals, or are we more like that church that Luther tried to reform and... got excommunicated?

What was that church like? They all considered themselves Christians, but so many were such in name only, not knowing much about Jesus, and not desiring to know about Him. Focus was on belonging to the church, going through the motions, not so much on being Jesus’ disciples and striving to lead a new life.

That church had become much like the world; values of that day were also values of the church. The Word of God was considered unclear, and the teaching of the church was shaped not by the Word, but by what the church's hierarchy said.

How does that sound? Quite familiar? One could find quite a lot of similarities between what we can observe happening among us today and the church that Luther tried to reform. And, surely, it is easy to complain about all the things that are wrong.

We could put together depressingly long list calling for reformation. The more difficult part is to let that reformation begin with ... me. With you. With each one of us. This is what our today's Gospel reading invites us to reflect on.

This is such an interesting text. **"So, 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.'**" Did you notice, who Jesus was talking to?

With those who had believed Him. In other words, we could say – with believers. Like ourselves. In this conversation we can see how little Jesus was concerned with simply growing the number of His followers.

Instead of numbers Jesus was interested in the quality of His disciples. He wanted His disciples to be genuine disciples, not just lukewarm followers in name only. And that genuineness comes with a commitment. **"If you abide in my word..."**

What is Jesus asking from His disciples? **"Abide in my words, then you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** That sounds so exciting, that sounds so appealing and makes so much sense.

This is how Jesus' disciples are defined, as those who want to listen to Him, to understand His teaching better, to conform their whole lives to Jesus' instructions, to seek the truth, to rejoice in God's wisdom, to reject all falsehood, to reject the worldly ways and worldly virtues, to be free and courageous.

What can be more exciting, what life can be more meaningful and beautiful?! To be Jesus' disciple is not about blind or naïve obedience, it is about understanding and rejoicing in the teaching of our Master. But how did those believers act? They got upset. They didn't want to listen to Jesus.

Strange, isn't it? They sort of were believers, but they didn't want to remain in Jesus' words. Why, we may wonder? Here comes the answer. They really didn't think that they needed anyone to tell them the truth and to free them.

They were so confident: **"We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone."** "We are members of Abraham's family; we don't need to abide in your words, Jesus, to be free!" Quite a confidence! It was similar as if someone today declared: "We are offspring of those who came to Australia on this or that ship six generations ago. We are offspring of those who built this or that church. We have

been members of this or that church our whole lives, we don't need to abide in your words, Jesus!" It is interesting how those listeners of Jesus were so blind to their situation. They claimed they have never been anyone's slaves. What about Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Romans?

Today we can easily join them: "We are the free people of the West; we are slaves to no one!" In fact, we have made our freedom and choice almost into the central principles in our lives. "No one is going to tell me what to do with my life and how to do it!" Neither parents, nor teachers, nor pastors, nor government.

And so, Jesus continues addressing such grave misunderstanding: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."** A slave to sin... They didn't see it that way; they didn't think so. We don't see it either.

Our sinfulness is in our very nature, we are tainted by sin through and through and we can't see our situation objectively, we need to trust the Word of God to enlighten us and to reveal us the truth.

You may remember that the meaning of the word "reformation" is better understood from its opposite, which is... yes, "deformation". Thus, reformation is about reforming, restoring something that has been deformed, damaged.

So also, it is helpful to reflect on Jesus' words from today's reading comparing them with the opposite. **"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

Meaning, for now we live in lies, our life is guided by falsehood, and thus we are enslaved to powers hostile to us, even if we don't realise it.

It is like we are seeing ourselves and our lives in this world through an obscure, dimmed and twisted glasses. It is like we are following a wrong map and wondering why we are not getting where we want.

We are surrounded by foggy lies and sticky falsehoods, and on our own we are not even able to recognize our situation. For we only see it from the inside. We are not free. We are slaves to our sinfulness and captives to the sinful state of this world.

Fine, but how can we know that we are not free and do not live by the truth? Here are a few examples, and they sting... We are not free and do not live by the truth if we care more about people liking us than about proclaiming them God's saving truth.

We are not free if we believe that we should not bother others with the Gospel, but should let them believe whatever they want to believe. We are not free if we are more concerned about pleasing people, instead of remaining faithful to our God.

We are not free if instead of asking what the Word of God teaches on this or that matter, we keep asking "why can't we do things the way I want?" We are not free if we struggle to admit that we have sinned and to ask for forgiveness.

We are not free if we love our congregations or our churches more than we love the truth of the Gospel and the Lord Jesus. We are not free if we want to bring into our church the same sugar-coated and lying language of tolerance and inclusivity and justice and love and whatever, that the world uses to rebel against the Creator.

We are not free if we listen to the world and think that the Church needs to adjust to the spirit of this age. We are not free if we get angry at pastors when the Word of God is preached and when it reveals our sins. Please, reflect on these!

I don't know about you, but these examples certainly reveal my slavery. So, what do you think, are we free? It is the Holy Spirit, who nudges our consciences with these confronting questions. We may not like them. We may not like when He exposes that we all actually live in lies and falsehood. Often unknowingly.

But why does the Spirit make us feel uncomfortable? Because He wants us to know the truth and to set us free. He wants to help us to see our situation clearly. He doesn't want anyone to perish because of our sins, our ignorance, indifference, or arrogance. He desires everyone to repent and to abide in Jesus' words.

Since the very beginning sin, the devil and the world have kept telling us that we will only be free if we stop listening to God. And we keep buying those lies. But it is like telling fish that she will only be free when she finally gets out of water.

If we remain in Jesus' teaching, if we remain with Him, who Himself is the truth and the life, then He will indeed make us free, and joyful and courageous. Because it is Jesus Christ, it is the Triune God who is the only One, who can and desires to satisfy our deepest longings for significance and love and meaning.

He has created our hearts for Himself. Your heart is so big that nothing smaller than the love and affection of the Triune God is powerful enough to fill it up. It is His embrace, His presence with us and in us, that makes the whole difference.

And remember, Jesus' words are not just marks on the paper or sounds in the wind. As He speaks, as His words are spoken, they are always accompanied by the Holy Spirit Himself. Then the Spirit of God comes and indwells in us.

He begins to reform us, to expose all sin and lies and falsehoods, He purifies us, enlightens us with the Gospel, with the Word of God, He makes us wise, restores us, comforts us, fills us with peace and joy and reshapes us to be more like Jesus.

When we abide in Jesus' words, we learn the truth, and we are granted true freedom, that is – to desire what our Creator and Redeemer desires for us. Then we are free to see His beautiful, good and wise design for our lives, then we long to understand it better, we delight in striving to live it out.

This is what Jesus does for us. He gives us a new life in truth and freedom, in courage and joy. And surely, we still keep failing Him, daily, our old hearts still crave for lies and falsehood, for what is foolish and wrong.

But as we remain in Jesus' teaching, the Spirit of Jesus brings us back, gently or sometimes not so gently revealing our sin, leading us to repentance, showering us with God's abundant forgiveness and bathing us in the ocean of His grace.

As we abide in Jesus' words, we not only are free, but we can also powerfully experience our God given freedom – that we are loved beyond our comprehension, that we are valued and cared for and appreciated, that we are embraced in God's own family and daily built up in God's wisdom. To live as His disciples.

This is what the Lutheran Reformation was about. About faithfully abiding in Jesus' teaching. This is where our hope lays today. Not in trying to please people, not in trying to follow the world, not in insisting on our will to happen. Only if we abide in Jesus' word, we will truly be His disciples, and Jesus will set us free.

I pray, may the Holy Spirit come and reform us, may He come and if needed drive us into despair, may He squeeze us and put us under pressure, may He kindle burning flames in our hearts so that we are passionate about God's truth.

May He do what it takes to help us to love the pure teaching of the Gospel, to love our Lord Jesus and to value above everything else the opportunity to humbly remain His students. Then, who knows... if we go through such furnace of the Holy Spirit, perhaps the truth will set us free and we will be able to boldly bring this truth and freedom to many and many.

Come, Lord Jesus, come and reform us!

Amen.