

“Map to freedom and joy!” 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 to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Do you want to be free? Do you want to be joyful? Would you like to get a map from God Himself that shows you how to obtain freedom and joy? Unless something is really wrong with you, I would assume that the answer is “yes”.

The truth is, He has already given us this map. A very simple map to true freedom and joy. It is repeatedly given to us again and again in the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit gave it through the prophets. The Holy Spirit gave it through John the Baptist.

Jesus spoke about it in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gave it through the apostles. The same map the Spirit gave us through Dr Martin Luther in the very first of his 95 theses, and it was this map that sparked the incredible spiritual renewal which today we remember as the Reformation.

The same map the Word of God still gives to us today, and it still has the same power to lead us to true freedom, to fill us with divine joy and to reform what has been deformed. The same simple map, the same simple message. Do you know what it is?

“Repent, and believe in the Gospel!” That’s it! Here it is!

Let us reflect once again on, first, **what this call “repent” means**, second, **what should we repent of** and, third, **why we should be glad and grateful that we still hear this divine call**: “Repent and believe in the Gospel!”

What does this call “repent” mean? How do we hear it? How does our old nature hear it? How does society hear it? Do we like that call, or does it immediately make us defensive? What are you saying? Why are you criticizing me? Am I not good enough? Do you think you are better? Yes, that’s our old Adam... very unhappy.

When our good Lord created us, He had this beautiful vision for what our lives will be like. We are designed and created to live in the most wonderful fellowship with our Triune God, fearing, loving and trusting Him above everything else.

Not because He commands us, but because we know what kind of gracious and incredibly attractive person He is, because we know what He has done for us. It is Him who gave you the gift of life, who secretly formed you in your mother’s womb.

It is Him who unceasingly cares for you and keeps giving life to you every day and every minute. It was Him, who didn't abandon us, when we abandoned Him. Instead, He became one of us, so that He can free us from our captivity to selfish desires and temptations of the flesh. It was Him who redeemed you, paying the highest price possible, giving His life in exchange to yours. He died so that you can live.

These are the reasons for us to fear, love and trust Him, for we know that He wishes us well, and we know that He knows better. Even when our eyes can't see the sense in what happens in our lives, He is with us, faithfully dwelling with us, embracing us.

But he also has created us for abundantly rich and exciting lives. He has entrusted us with multiple callings: be fruitful and multiply, take care of creation, go and make disciples of all nations, be my ambassadors, proclaim my excellences, etc.

This is who you, each one of you! are created and redeemed to be and do. Now consider this – do we really live that way? So fully and beautifully? Do we? Do you? Of course, not! We are pale shadows compared to what our Lord intended for us.

We are weakened by our passions, selfishly turned towards ourselves, deceived by the world, the devil and our own flesh, lost in our ignorance, wandering through this life as captives who are being led to the final execution. Unable to free ourselves.

Then, suddenly, our Father's mighty voice breaks in: "Repent!" He is not saying: "O, you are bad, so, so bad!" What He is saying is: "Wake up, return to me, my dear child, so that I can bless you and restore you for the life I created and redeemed you!"

I want you to have this new life with me already now, I want to give you true freedom to be who you are created and redeemed to be, I want to fill your life with joy, I want you to rejoice as we are together and as you fellowship with my saints." "Repent" is the call of a loving Father to receive the life that He has prepared for you.

"Repent" is not about giving up something fun and of great value and choosing a sad and dull life of some religious obedience. It is a gracious call to turn away from everything that hinders you from enjoying the abundant goodness of our Lord at whose right hand there are pleasures forevermore.

And by the way, when we think about what reformation means, it is nothing else than the same call graciously spoken to the Church: "Repent! You all my beloved children, turn to me, let me restore what was deformed, so that you are free to enjoy the abundance of blessings and good things that I have prepared for you!"

Now our second question was – **what should we repent of?** Those things don't change that much. Of course, we all may be struggling in our own ways, there may be different things that rob us of freedom, joy and peace. Different for you and me.

Hopefully we know what they are. But in our Gospel reading Jesus speaks about something that we always need to be reminded of. I guess this is why the Church has assigned this reading from John 8 to the Reformation Day.

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” “If you abide in my word. If you keep listening to me. If you let my word dwell in you richly. If you realize that this is my word that you have received. It is, indeed, my message to you. I myself speak it to you, it’s me!”

Do we do this? Do we rejoice in the fact, that the Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit speaks to us in His word, are we in awe, amazed, excited, thirsty to drink it, to fill our ears and minds with it, to feast on it in sermons, in Bible studies, reading the Bible at home, in Christian conversation... Do we? Is this us?

Is this a fair description of what our attitude toward the Word of God is? You tell me. But this is exactly what makes us disciples of Jesus. This is what the disciples of Jesus do. They abide in God’s Word. They delight, take it in, meditate and inwardly digest the Word of God. This is what makes someone Jesus’ disciple.

Then we are truly His disciples. Is this us? Also remember, what is the Church of Christ sent to do? Yes, to make disciples! And this is how we make them – inviting, teaching, modelling for them, helping them to abide in Jesus’ word. That is how it is done. There is no other way. Is this us? Is this what we do?

Or should we repent for not abiding in Jesus’ words? For not cherishing the gift of the Word, for not searching for the truth and not letting it to shape everything in our lives, for not appreciating this incredible privilege that we have received, that we have the Word of God available to us, freely, in so many ways, every day, everywhere.

And see how it works. If we do not abide in the Word, then we really are not too good as Jesus’ disciples. But that is not all. Then we don’t know the truth. We don’t know the truth! Which means, we live in lies. We dwell in darkness. We are deceived and fooled around by spiritual forces that wish no good to us.

We become vulnerable, we become helpless, we become captives to those forces of darkness. All because we don’t abide in the Word. “Repent! Repent, my dear child!” Can you see how full of grace and fatherly love this call is?!

Our Father hates to see His beloved children enslaved by our enemies, His heart bleeds when He sees how your freedom is taken away, how you are robbed of your joy and peace, how the truth is hidden from us and we wander aimlessly in darkness.

“Repent!” That is a cry of a loving Father, who wants you to know the truth. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”. Yes, it is! When God speaks, His Spirit enlightens us, and even the simple are made wise.

Then we know the truth, we understand this world, and “we are not tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” We are set free to be who we are created to be.

So, yes, I think this is continually our greatest challenge. To abide in the words of Jesus, both for us as the church, and as members in the body of Christ. And we tend

to make our own excuses to not abide in Jesus' words, as you well know: "I already go to the Church, isn't that enough? I have so much to do, I just don't have time for that." Or what is even worse, what we hear more often in wider church:

"Jesus, you have no idea how different this time is! We have different challenges. And your words are not very helpful. Actually, they are confusing, difficult to understand, and they are not clear. We can't rely on your words, Jesus. We need something else."

If that's us, we are not truly disciples, the truth slips away, and we lose our freedom.

That's where we come to our last question – **why we should be glad and grateful that we still hear this divine call "repent!"** That is true. Old Adam in us may be upset, we don't like the call to repentance. We want to do things our way.

But as the Holy Spirit convinces us that this call comes from our loving God, and that this call is an invitation to enjoy life of freedom and God's blessings in their fullness, perhaps, we can learn to hear it differently, both as members of the body of Christ, and also as His Church. To rejoice and be grateful.

We also need to be mindful of another aspect of this call "repent!" which has been spoken through the prophets and the apostles and that caused the renewal and restoration of the Church that we know as the Reformation.

Let's remember, the call "repent" is pure grace of God. Even if through it the Spirit shows us where we have strayed, where we have failed, where we have disobeyed our Lord Jesus, even if that reminder may hurt and anger us, it is pure grace of God.

And it is not something that we should take for granted. We still live in the time of God's grace and patience, He still calls us back to Himself, every time as we wander away. But if we continue to shut our ears, if we silence this call, if we refuse to listen to Him, if we refuse to return to Him, one day there may be ... silence.

The silence that says: "Fine, let your will happen, do whatever pleases you!" May the Lord Jesus be gracious and patient so that that day doesn't come to us. May that day not come to the Lutheran Church in Australia. May the Lord help us to repent!

May He grant us His grace and reform us, may He help us to abide in His Word, gladly, so that we can truly be His disciples, may He bless us with His truth and grant us true freedom and divine joy! For He has given you a map of how to get there.

You have it. Never forget it! "Repent and believe in the Gospel!"

Blessed Reformation Day, Brothers and Sisters!

Amen.