

“Small. Ugly. Uncertain.” 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, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Small. Ugly. Uncertain. That is what sinful humans tend to do with God’s message - to make God’s revelation small and ugly and uncertain. Why? Because we struggle to comprehend the grandeur of God’s revelation.

The frightening depth of our sinfulness, the unfathomable riches of God’s grace. The incredible spiritual power of the Word of God, the Holy Baptism, the Lord’s Supper. The unbelievable privileges and authority entrusted to God’s people, to us, to you!

We struggle and then we try to domesticate God’s revelation. We do. We tend to reduce it so that it becomes understandable, we eliminate mystery, we twist and compress it to be able to fit it in our tiny and feeble minds. We have always done it.

We lessen the magnificent nature of Divine revelation to be just like the things of this world. And when we do that, we obscure the grandeur, the beauty and the comfort of God’s message to us. We diminish and *deform* [!] the Good News, the Gospel.

Have you ever wondered what’s a big deal with that Lutheran Reformation? Why would we remember it every year? Perhaps, it would help if we first asked the question – what is reformation, what does it mean to reform?

The most helpful answer I received was from one of my teachers. Reformation is best understood from its opposite, that is – deformation. Something good has been deformed and needs to be reformed, restored to its initial goodness. That is what the Lutheran Reformation was about. About restoring something good that was deformed.

Our Redeemer Jesus was born 2000 years ago on the outskirts of the mighty Roman Empire in an ordinary family. Similarly, five centuries ago it pleased the Lord of the Church to restore the beauty, clarity and comfort of His message through an ordinary monk, later a professor in a small university in a remote town of Wittenberg.

There are lots of parallels between the events of the 1st century and those of the 16th century. Here are just a few. In the 1st century the authority of God’s Word was to some extent replaced by tradition of men. Similarly in 16th century the Gospel of Jesus Christ was almost lost behind layers and layers of human traditions.

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In the 1st century many believed that they can and should merit God's favor and salvation by keeping countless religious laws and rituals. Similarly in the 16th century the false belief that we have to earn God's favor had resulted in the rise of numerous monastic orders, pilgrimages, weird veneration of relics, sales of indulgences, etc.

In the 1st century the Temple was transformed from the house of prayer to the center of massive scale religious business. Similarly, before the 16th century the Church was this wealthy and powerful institution, owning up to 1/3 of land in Europe, even appointing and removing kings, commanding armies and demanding everyone's obedience to the institution and its rules.

In the 1st century the scribes, priests and Pharisees were considered as higher spiritual class, those who had access to God and could speak on behalf of Him, and interpret His message, while the rest were as second class citizens.

Similarly in 16th century it was believed that pope, bishops, priests, monks were busy with God-pleasing activities, while others and their mundane lives – caring for your spouse, raising children, working for daily bread - didn't count for much in God's eyes.

But... **when you do abide in the Word**, as Dr Luther was so passionately drawn to, **the Word of God reveals you the truth, and the truth sets you free**, indeed. The Word purifies you from all the twisted and harmful ideas, from that smallness, ugliness and uncertainty. That is exactly what happened at the time of Lutheran Reformation. Dr Luther simply abided in the Word, and as a result as he testifies himself:

"I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise, I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy [and exposed all false teachings] that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."

That is how the gracious Lord used Dr Luther to uncover and release the beautiful and powerful truth of the Triune God, to brush away all the small, ugly and uncertain human doctrines and traditions, and to bestow joyful freedom upon children of God.

In the 1st century the Word became flesh and dispelled all darkness and falsehood with His presence, and similarly in 16th century the same Word was rediscovered, taught and preached with a similar effect. So, what changed, what was reformed?

Let's highlight these four. **The Word of God again returned to its place as God's self-revelation and our highest authority.** True God wants you to know Him. He speaks to you. He wants you to listen to Him so that you may know Him just as He knows you.

Whenever God speaks, His words are never just information. They are His power to raise us from being dead in our sin to new life in Christ. As God speaks, He sends the Spirit of life and truth to dwell in you and thus embraces you into fellowship with Him.

He opens the Scripture for you, He fills you with wisdom and grace, with peace and joy. He reveals to you the most important things about us, about our loving and gracious God and about what He has prepared for us in the age to come. Good things!

Then, the Good News was made good again. Your salvation doesn't depend on your performance, you can't earn it, and you don't have to. It depends on God's grace alone, and there is abundance of it.

The Triune God always acts first, He comes looking for you, calling you to Himself, awakening you with His life-giving Word. And you simply receive His gifts by trusting His promises, and even the ability to trust Him is His gift.

The heart of God's message to you is not about His good and wise instructions for our lives, and they are good indeed, it is about His unchanging attitude toward us, it is about how fervently He loves us, His rebellious creatures, including me and you.

He doesn't turn His face away, even when you turn your back to Him. He doesn't give up on you, even when you give up on Him. He knows that you are not yourself in your current state, that you are under the spell of sin, and under the power of the devil, and He won't leave you there. He is willing to lay down His life so that only He can set you free. That is what He does as you abide in His Word.

Also, our understanding of the Church was reformed. The Church is, as Dr Luther called Her, the *creature of the Word*. The essence of the Church is not to be found in institutions that wield power in this world, it is found in the power of the Word who comes to us and changes us from inside, gives us new hearts, makes us a new creation. This divine Word transforms us as we listen to it, study it, discuss it, it works with us as the water of Baptism washes us clean, as the words of forgiveness renew our hearts, and as the bread and cup unite us with the very Lord of the Church.

And fourth, the understanding of who we are also was reformed. Pastors are not some sort of religious elite. They are God's gift to His people and His servant-agents through whom the Lord of the Church blesses His children. He uses Pastors to deliver His life-giving gifts of grace to us according to His instructions.

He uses pastors to keep and guard apostolic teaching, that beautiful treasure that is always under attack from the evil one, and to rebuke all who want to diminish God's beautiful truth and comfort with their small and ugly and uncertain human ideas.

And what about us all? Ordinary Christians are not some second-class citizens in God's Kingdom. You all are **"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."** [1 Pet 2:9]

Meaning, you all have direct access to God the Father by virtue of being made His children; you can pray and bring the needs of all people to the Father's ear. And He has promised that He will listen to your prayers.

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Furthermore, God has placed you all in many relationships where you can give yourself to Him as living sacrifices. These relationships are not random, they are not a waste of your time, they are your God given callings - in His Church, in family, in workplace, in society.

Sounds good, but what does this mean practically? Something like this. In the Church you are to encourage other Christian by proclaiming them the excellences of Christ. Yes, your fellow Christians are in need to hear the Gospel and you are here to speak it to them. Yes, you! Every day! Something as simple as:

“Your Father in heaven loves you. He looks at you and delights in you. He says to you: “You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased! You are good, very good and precious in my eyes! I am with you and I want to bless you!”” Speak this to everyone and see how the power of the Gospel renews them.

In your family callings you are privileged to partake in God’s work of creation. Yes, as husbands and wives, as fathers and mothers, to fill the Earth and to care for it. Majestic! You are to speak the Gospel to your spouse; and you are to proclaim and teach the Word of God to your children and to your grandchildren. Great privileges and responsibilities!

And you are to serve in your workplaces and communities, as God’s people, shaped by God’s wisdom, empowered by God’s grace, thus bearing witness about the One, from whom that grace and wisdom comes. And you are to speak the new life-giving truth and beauty and comfort of God’s reality to your friends.

And you are to pray for unbelievers, and you are to invite people to hear the Word of God. And you are to defend the Christian faith. All of this and more. You all are called, sent and privileged to participate in the Creator’s work and in Christ’s great rescue mission.

Great, beautiful responsibilities! And where do we begin? **“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** For that Word is living and active, it never returns without accomplishing its purpose.

That is what Dr Luther did, He abided in God’s Word, and the Lutheran Reformation happened. The small and ugly human ideas and inventions were exposed for what they were, and the beauty and the comforting truth of the Gospel of Christ was restored to shine brightly once again. That is why we remember the Lutheran Reformation.

You are heirs of this Reformation. You have received these divine, beautiful, truthful and comforting treasures of the Gospel of Christ. Renewed, restored, reformed. Now they are entrusted to us - to keep and guard them, to cherish and proclaim, to rejoice and to share these divine treasures with everyone, so that we can bless them as we have been so undeservedly blessed. That is why we remember the Lutheran Reformation.

I pray may the Spirit of God help us to abide in the Word, to live in truth and freedom as genuine disciples of Christ so that all smallness and ugliness and uncertainty gives way to the grandeur and beauty and comfort of the Gospel of Jesus. To Him be all glory!

Blessed Reformation Day, Brother and Sisters!

Amen.