

Reformation Sunday 2020 October 25, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”, Jesus says. I think we could all use a little more truth-telling in today’s world. Lies are all around us. Especially in this election year, and in every election year, there are plenty of lies to go around. Every candidate has their own slanted version of the truth. As the saying goes, there’s always two sides to every story, and the truth is somewhere in the middle. When it comes to the mudslinging ads that we see on TV, they are steeped in fear and slanted language to get you to believe one person’s side of the story. Quite often the lies told in our world—political or otherwise—are meant to instill fear in us, and get us to act in a particular way.

Of course, these are only some of the lies within our world. Lies are all around us—from small, white lies that seem to have little consequence, to earth-shattering lies that can ruin relationships, steer societies in the wrong direction, and destroy trust between individuals and communities. And sometimes the most destructive lies are the times when we choose to remain silent instead of speaking the truth.

And I think the way that lies have caused the most destruction in our world is when we accept a story as reality simply because it’s what we want to believe is true. When someone tells us what we want to hear, it’s so easy to believe it. Usually, we don’t even question it. And this is becoming more and more the case in our world today. As long as we agree with the statement, we accept it as truth without question. It doesn’t matter what the truth really is, we build a narrative reality for ourselves based on the story that we want to believe is true.

The problem is that sometimes the most popular story is not the true story. Sometimes the truth is *unpopular*. Sometimes the truth makes people upset. Sometimes the truth has gotten people killed—both in our world today, and throughout history. We can trace this all the way back to the prophet Jeremiah who we hear about today.

Jeremiah was called by God to proclaim a message to God’s people. He spoke about Jerusalem’s fall to the Babylonians and their exile from the Promised Land. He called the Israelites to repent, to turn to God, and be obedient to God’s commands. It was a very unpopular message, he had plenty of enemies, and no one wanted to believe him. Yet he spoke the truth because that is what God called him to do. But at the same time, he was competing with a false prophet named Hananiah who was very popular and well-liked, but he did not speak the truth. Hananiah spoke a simple message of peace and prosperity. He simply told the people what they wanted to hear, even though it was built on lies. And many people accepted Hananiah’s words, and it resulted in disobedience among the Israelites and increased danger. Certainly, similar things happen in today’s world as well.

Even though Jeremiah’s message was unpopular, Jeremiah spoke the truth. And the same could be said about Jesus. God sent Jesus into this world to proclaim a radical message of love for all of God’s people. A message of freedom from sin. A message of forgiveness and salvation for all. And this message made people angry. It made people so angry, that eventually they arrested Jesus and hung him on a cross to die. The message was unpopular, and Jesus got killed for it. But in Jesus’ death and resurrection, we see that he spoke the truth. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.” In Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, we see that God truly does love all people, and that God seeks to save us from our sin. And this happens through Christ—whose message was unpopular to many, but whose message brought to us the most important truth of this world.

And on this Reformation Sunday, we also remember Martin Luther, who also dared to speak the truth. Martin Luther was a monk, and as he read the Bible and struggled with his faith, he found some teachings of the church troubling. The church of his time was teaching that you had to work to pay off your sins. That if you didn't do enough, you would spend time in purgatory, and that some sins were simply unforgiveable. For Luther, it sounded like the church was teaching that it was possible to void the promise of salvation that we receive in baptism. And Luther disagreed with that teaching. This is not what he read in the Bible. Luther believed very strongly that nothing could separate us from the love of God, and it is only through God's gift of grace that we are saved. So, Luther brought this question along with many others to discuss with the leadership of the church.

But the leadership of the church didn't want to hear it. They had constructed a reality for themselves that allowed them to be powerful and rich, and they did not want their livelihood challenged. They saw Luther's questions as a threat to their comfortable lifestyle, and Luther was excommunicated from the church. He became an outlaw, and had to live in hiding. His message was so unpopular with the authorities that if someone had killed Luther, they would not have faced legal punishment. In fact, there were theologians before Luther with similar ideas that *were* killed for their teachings. Luther faced real danger. But he continued to proclaim his message, he continued to confess his faith, because the God that he knew and had experienced was a God of love and salvation and mercy, not one of judgment and exclusion and elitism.

And as many Christians have read the Bible, many agree with Luther. Certainly, we wouldn't be here if we didn't agree with Luther's teachings. As we have lived out our faith and struggled with difficult issues, we have found that the God we know and have experienced is this same God of love and salvation and mercy.

But we still find today that sometimes the message of the Bible, the message of God's love, the message of forgiveness and grace, sometimes these messages are unpopular. It is much more popular to believe that if you simply pray hard enough, God will give you whatever you want. It is more popular to believe that only the best Christians will earn their way into heaven, and that by being perfect we might be one of God's favorites. It is more popular to believe that God is on our side in every disagreement, argument, war, or struggle, even though we know that God is the creator and redeemer of *all* people, and that God has *no* dividing lines. It's easy to believe the lies, when the lies are what we want to hear. But when we listen for the truth, we find God's message of love for all.

But even though it's unpopular, the God that we know and have experienced is that same God of love, mercy and forgiveness, that Martin Luther knew. The truth is that God provides salvation for us in baptism, and there's nothing we can do to earn or change it. The truth is that God's forgiveness is abundant for all people. The truth is that God loves us and the whole world. And the truth is that God has called us to join in God's mission of bringing God's kingdom to earth.

It would be easy to remain silent. It would be easy to keep our views to ourselves, especially when they might get us in trouble, or offend others, or even put us in danger. It would be easy to accept the popular stories that we want to believe are true. But God calls us to live a daring, confident life of faith, a life that is built on the love of God in Christ Jesus. God calls us to live into our faith by proclaiming God's radical love, God's love that breaks down barriers, God's love that ends divisions, God's love that calls all people into community within the body of Christ.

For thousands of years, people have been challenged to proclaim the truth even when it's not what people want to hear. But in the midst of all the lies of this world, we have found the truth—that the love of God lives in each of us, and that this love sustains us, supports us and strengthens us. Let us cling to this truth that God loves us and all the world, and let us proclaim this truth through our living faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.