

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who is God's Word made flesh to reform the world, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Historically, Lutherans have taken the last Sunday in October and set it aside as "Reformation Sunday," where we give thanks to God for the life and work of Martin Luther and other reformers of the church in the 1500's who brought back to light the truth of the Gospel. Luther started the protestant reformation 501 years ago by putting forward 95 debating points. Today's a day where it's very tempting to just look at that past event and leave it at that. If that's all we did here today, we'd be doing a grave disservice to the Gospel. This text we have before us today is one that first spoke to those followers of Jesus who were trying to figure out what exactly it meant to be Jesus' disciple, but it does so much more. It spoke to the Church in Luther's time 500 years ago and Jesus words from today's Gospel still speak words of reformation truth to our ears today and as long as we continue to abide in them, they will speak to generations of Jesus followers to come.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is speaking to some Jews who had believed in him. He's telling them what it truly means to be one of His disciples when He says: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples." John's Gospel starts with these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1-2) The words of scripture these Jews have been hearing for centuries, in the Law and the Prophets, what we call the Old

Testament today, is literally standing right in front of them! Jesus is inviting them to “abide in Him, abide in what He says and does. When you do that, he says, you will know the truth. You will know one simple undeniable truth; that you cannot, on your own, win your forgiveness and salvation by your own works or efforts, but that I (Jesus) am going to the cross to do it for you, and *that* truth will set you free from sin, death and the power of the devil!” You’d think this would be great news to these would be disciples who’ve been waiting for their long-promised Messiah, and have heard of Him through His Word.

Well if that’s what you thought you’d be wrong... These folks start to throw in their own objections. “We’re Abraham’s descendants and we’ve never been slaves to anybody...” You see, they have their own idea of who their Savior will be and it’s not in alignment with this Word become flesh, telling them to deny themselves, take up their own cross and follow Him to Calvary. That plan didn’t fit into their preconceived notion of the Messiah they were looking for... Their objection has problems from the start. Apparently, they had forgotten about their ancestors being enslaved in Egypt, and that it was God who delivered them out of that slavery through Moses. Not only that, but what about all those pesky Roman soldiers patrolling the streets of Jerusalem? Their objection is faulty on an even more basic level when they evoke their lineage as being Abraham’s descendants. Instead of putting their faith and trust in God, and His promise to the Jewish people

for a Savior from sin, they are looking to something else for their salvation.

They're looking at their lineage, their Jewish heritage. Essentially, they're saying; but Jesus, we're Abraham's spiritual descendants. We're the chosen people of God and that means we're automatically saved! You can't say we're wrong in the eyes of God because we're Jews, God's special people! The Jewish people are God's special people, but God also had a plan for the rest of us! If you're a devout, orthodox Jew, then perhaps your Jewishness is going to save you. If you trust your heritage for your salvation, than all you need or want would be a political here and now kind of savior, but Jesus came to save the world that God so loved. The Savior promised in Scripture was promised to save from sin, death, and the power of the devil, not foreign armies and things of the world. Our slavery isn't a slavery to foreign governments or worldly slave masters like the Egyptians were to their ancestors, it's a slavery to sin itself; sin which seeks to keep us enslaved and dead forever. Jesus words to them and to us are words of reformation, calling us to rethink our very notion Messiah.

You'd think after hearing this from Jesus himself, the Church would never lose sight of those important life-giving reforming words of Gospel-Good News. Unfortunately, there's always a need for another reformation. The church of Martin Luther's day had fallen into the same trap as the people in our Gospel reading. By the time Luther was ordained a priest in Erfurt Germany in 1507, the

truth of the Gospel had become obscured. It was being taught you could contribute to your own salvation, in fact, you HAD to. You did it by saying the right prayers enough times, paying enough money for an indulgence, and doing enough good works as commanded by the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope to reduce your time of punishment after you died in a place called Purgatory before you could be admitted to heaven. Not only that, but the people were also being taught by the church their work of buying an indulgence could release a deceased loved one's soul from purgatory, for the right price of course. This whole system of works-righteousness tortured Luther to no end. He spent countless nights in his cell, whipping himself, exposing himself to the cold, sleeping on the floor, depriving himself of basic needs of food and sleep, among other tortures, in an effort to atone for his sins, but instead of finding comfort and assurance, he only went further into despair, never knowing if he had done enough to appease God. He saw Jesus Christ as an angry judge, waiting for the right moment to condemn him to an eternity in hell. It wasn't until Luther returned to the Scriptures themselves and studied them in his role as Professor of Bible did he discover the truth about Jesus. Truth contained in words like the words from our Epistle reading from Romans 3: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..." In these and other passages such as Ephesians 2:8-9 which read "It is by grace you have been saved

through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” In God’s Word Luther discovered the Scriptural truth that salvation wasn’t dependent on our works or efforts, or our spiritual heritage, but completely on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By returning to the Word of Christ, Luther was freed from slavery to sin and he wasn’t about to keep this message to himself. He preached it from the pulpit, taught it in the University classroom, and started writing about it. Little did Luther know God would use his efforts to bring the Gospel back to light.

That brings us to today, Reformation Sunday, 2018. While we are here in part to give thanks to God for the work of Martin Luther and the other reformers of his day who worked to bring the truth of the Gospel back as the central teaching of the Christian faith, we’re reminded that the Reformation of the church isn’t just a one-time deal. Luther himself once said that the Reformation of the church is ongoing. You see, Jesus’ words in the Gospel reading were not just “Reformation Words” for the people of the Bible times. They weren’t just “Reformation Words” for the people of Luther’s day, they’re “Reformation Words” for you and me. Jesus words are reformation words for Connor and Emily who are about to stake their lives on the truth of Jesus and His Gospel.

Emily and Connor, in just a few minutes you will confess your faith publicly and take hold for yourselves, possibly for the first time as adults, the truth that sets

people free. You aren't slaves to any oppressive slave masters, but you, like all the rest of us, are slaves to sin, death, and the power of the devil. Only the power of Jesus Christ and His righteousness can set you free. Today you are publicly aligning yourselves and promising to stay aligned with this Jesus Christ for the rest of your life. May your freedom in Jesus Christ bring you joy in all circumstances of your life. May your joy overflow into service as you spread these ever-reforming words of Jesus Christ everywhere you go.

Today, on this Reformation Sunday, we give thanks for Jesus' "Reformation Words" to the Jews of his day, showing them where they went off track and leading them back to the freedom of the Gospel. We give thanks for Martin Luther, who led the church of his day out of the pit of works-righteousness to rediscover Jesus "Reformation Words" that were to be the church's life and salvation. Today we also give thanks that God has continued to preserve those "Reformation Words" for us to hear today, and to share with our world today. May we always remember who truly is our life and salvation, and center our lives as individuals and our life as a congregation around the Reformation Words of our Savior, seeking to reform our lives and His church now and forever. Amen.