

Sermon for Reformation Sunday Yr B, 28/10/2012
Based on Jn 8:31-32

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“If you continue in my word”

Today, for those of us who are Lutheran Christians, we celebrate Reformation Sunday. When I reflect upon the many Reformation sermons that I've either read, heard other pastors preach, or preached myself; I think there may be three different kinds of sermons.

One type of sermon that is often preached is what I would refer to as the psychological-existential-biographical sermon. The content of this type of Reformation sermon often focuses on Martin Luther and explores the various aspects of his personality and many of his personal issues, such as: his rather strained relationship with his father; his existential angst focussing on his fears of God the angry Judge; his fear of death; his guilty conscience; his struggles with depression; his battles with the devil and so on.

This type of sermon can indeed be rather entertaining—since Luther was certainly a colourful personality. The most obvious problem however with this type of sermon is that it is too Luther-centred and not enough biblical-centred.

The second type of Reformation sermon that is often preached is what I'd call the historical-sociological-ecclesiological sermon. The content of this type of sermon usually focuses on all of the historical events of the Reformation age. For example, preachers might focus on the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church with its teaching and preaching of selling indulgences and the catchy sales pitch ditty of: “When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” One might focus on the superstitions and lack of literacy among many church-folk, including the parish priests of that day. Or one might look at the implications of the

invention of the printing press and moveable type as a key factor in shaping the Reformation. Or one might look at the growing nationalism in places such as Germany, and its increasing antagonism towards Rome and the elaborate building of St. Peter's Basilica. Or one might focus on the darker, more crotchety and embarrassing side of Luther such as: the implications of Luther's anti-Semitism—advocating the burning of Jewish synagogues and books, and the expulsion of the Jews from Germany. Or Luther's political alliances with the nobility class and his counsel to them during the Peasant's Revolt—to kill and destroy the peasants, and so on.

Although providing the historical, sociological and ecclesiological setting of the Reformation is helpful and informative; perhaps one of the most difficult problems that this type of sermon raises is that we become so preoccupied with analysing the historical details that the sermon no longer is a sermon that edifies, but becomes transformed into an academic lecture.

The third type of Reformation sermon, which, I think is the most powerful, is what I refer to as the theological-biblical-practical sermon. Martin Luther's most significant contribution to Christianity, I believe, is his theological and biblical discoveries.

Luther created a Copernican revolution in the world of theology. The predominant scholastic theology of Luther's day was what he called a theology of glory. The basic premise was this: God rewards human beings with grace only when they deserve it by doing their very best, by working their hardest, by achieving their greatest goals—only then would God reach down and reward them with grace. Luther turned that premise on its head with a theology of the cross. His basic premise was this: We can do nothing to deserve God's grace. At our very lowest, when we've failed, sinned, doubted and struggled, and feel farthest away from God; God in Christ is still with us to forgive, love and accept us unconditionally. This is what Luther referred to as "the great or happy exchange," God in Christ

removes our sins from us and takes them on himself by dying on the cross and gives us his righteousness.

Luther's theological discovery, of course was based on a new, refreshing way of reading the Bible. Prior to this, Luther felt oppressed by the condemning, law-oriented words of the Bible. Then, one day, he began to read the Bible in such a way as to awaken him to all of God's promises, to realise the powerful message of the Gospel—that God's love for us in Christ and his sacrificial death on the cross is unconditional, immeasurable, and eternal. For Luther, the power of God's word became multidimensional—it could accomplish all things, and therefore is the highest authority in the life of the church. Luther also equated the word as Christ himself—hence a living word, providing all that is necessary for life.

In *Martin Luther's Treatise On Christian Liberty*, he stated it very well: One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ....Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing.¹

Luther's insight here, of insisting on the primacy of God's Word, in all of its multidimensional forms, captures the essence of what Christ himself is saying in today's gospel: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Indeed, it is the Word of God, in its multidimensional forms, including that of the written Bible that has proven to draw Christians closer together. For example, Bible Societies have been formed by Christians of

many theological and denominational traditions. They are able to work together in translating the Bible into a wide variety of languages. Ever since the Second Vatican Council, the Bible and biblical scholarship has become more prominent in the Roman Catholic Church. In fact today, ironically, some of the best biblical scholars are Roman Catholics. Scholars of many Christian denominations gathered around the Bible to meet as the International Committee to prepare what we refer to as the Revised Common Lectionary. Now Christians of a variety of denominations around the world, including us Lutherans, read and base their sermons on the same appointed Scripture texts every Sunday in our worship services. This is a significant expression of Christian unity rooted in the Word of God.

So Jesus' promise in today's gospel of continuing in the Word of God and knowing the truth and being set free is a reality for which we are most grateful. The more we read and study the Word of God; the more we hear sermons preached rooted in God's Word; the more God the Holy Spirit is at work to reassure us of God's unconditional promises of love and forgiveness; the more we are free to respond to God's love and grace by living a life of faithfulness; of loving our neighbours and making a difference in the church and in the world. God's multidimensional Word continues to be Good News and life-giving for everyone. May the Holy Spirit inspire and equip each one of us to be bearers of God's Good News in our thoughts, words and actions. Amen.

1 John Dillenberger, editor, *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1961), pp. 54-55.