

“If You Abide in My Word ...”

In the name of him who saves us by grace alone through faith alone, dear friends in Christ: “The truth will set you free”. I find it remarkable how often I hear these well-known words of Jesus quoted in nonreligious contexts. It’s heard from the mouth of the prisoner who claims he was wrongly convicted, the teacher in a blighted inner city school who’s telling her students how to escape the cycle of poverty that enslaves them, the politician who claims that his plan is the only one that can save the nation, and also the wild-eyed madman spouting conspiracy theories about how we’re all the mindless dupes of a covert consortium of multi-national corporations, or of a secret syndicate of sinister masterminds known as the Illuminati, or perhaps even of aliens from another galaxy. These and many others claim to have the truth that will set their hearers free – and they quote Jesus when saying so presumably to lend some weight to their words.

What bothers me, though, is that invariably they leave off the first part of what Jesus said about the truth that sets people free. You see, there are all kinds of truths out there. And as you probably know, some of them are more true than others; but not everything that’s true has the power to set anyone free. It’s true that one and one are two, for example, that Frankfurt is the capital of Kentucky, and that chocolate is one of life’s greatest pleasures (though some poor deluded souls continue to deny it); but no one is freed from anything by knowing these truths. Or going back to my first example, if the whole truth were known about most convicted criminals who claim that they were falsely accused, they’d end up spending *more* time in prison, not less. So, it’s not just any truth that can set you free.

No. *It’s the truth that Jesus teaches* that has the power to release you from bondage. And what Jesus says concerning this truth is this: “If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples, and then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” This is key: those who know the liberating truth are *only* those who are first *abiding* in the Word of Jesus—the *whole* Word of Jesus, and who are as a result truly his disciples. The clear implication is that if you don’t abide in his Word (and the word “abide” there means to remain in, continue in, or stay and live in) if you don’t do that – if you’re not *remaining* in his Word – then you don’t know the truth that sets you free. Similarly, if you pick and choose only certain parts of what Jesus has to say, discarding the parts you don’t find quite so appealing, well, then you won’t know the truth that sets you free either. All of which makes it rather ironic that so many people who say, “The truth will set you free” are those who are doing just that: cutting out the most important part of what Jesus had to say about it.

And that’s precisely what a lot of the people to whom Jesus was talking when he said these words were doing. The bulk of the eighth chapter of John’s Gospel, of which today’s text is just a little slice taken from the center, consists of a rather heated discussion Jesus had with some Jews in the Temple. And the group he’s talking to is a mixed bag: some who would definitely have called themselves his disciples, some who were sitting on the edge and weren’t quite sure what to make of Jesus just yet, and others who had already decided against him. They only wanted to argue with him. And probably the biggest division was that center one: the undecideds. They liked some of the things that Jesus said. In the verse just before our text, it says, “*As he was saying*

these things [to them], many believed in him.” So, they were definitely leaning in his direction. But Jesus doesn’t leave his hearers just half way there. He pushes them on toward *true* discipleship. That’s why the text says, “So Jesus said to Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples ... and you will know the truth that sets you free.’”

You see, what happens in the course of the discussion, is that Jesus keeps saying things that are increasingly challenging for them to accept. They are things that go against what they believe. In fact, you see them arguing with him even in this short section. When Jesus tells them they’ll be free, they get indignant. “What do you mean, ‘you’ll be free’? We are the offspring of Abraham! We’ve never been slaves to anyone!” That Jesus would imply that they’re in some kind of bondage offends them deeply.

And that shows us two things. First, that they didn’t know their political history very well. The truth is that if you were to consider the 2000 years or so since their great forefather Abraham lived, you’d see that the times when God’s people actually governed themselves as a free and autonomous nation would be the exception rather than the rule. They were enslaved first by Egyptians. After the Lord freed them from that cruel oppression and settled them in the Promised Land, they were constantly coming under the power of neighboring nations: Syria, Moab, Ammon, Midian, Philistia, and several others all held them in servitude for periods of time. After that came the big empires: the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. In last week’s Gospel we heard Jesus being asked about paying taxes to Caesar. Listen: as a rule, free people do not pay taxes to foreign governments. They only do it if they’ve been conquered—in which case they’re not free. And the Jews had been steadily paying taxes to one foreign government or another for at least the preceding seven hundred years. Their freedom was an illusion. The truth is that they’d been under foreign domination for longer than anyone could remember.

And just as they didn’t know or understand their political history – to include their present servitude to Rome, neither did they comprehend their religious and spiritual history – to include their present, perpetual, and all prevailing domination by sin. They imagined that they were, spiritually speaking, free. After all, the Lord had given them his holy Law, which they dutifully and scrupulously devoted themselves to obeying. They even went so far as to set up complicated bylaws and customs to serve as hedges around the commandments to prevent anyone from getting even close to committing a sin – or so they thought. And through their careful adherence to all these additional regulations, they believed that they were righteous before God, that the Lord was completely satisfied and pleased with them. Sin, they thought, was what other people do: pagans, idolaters, criminals, and those lower elements of society who spurned their heritage as Jews and openly reveled in scandalous behavior. Those are the sinners; not us. We strictly obey the Law, therefore we are free.

Apparently, it never occurred to them that if they were truly free and righteous, they wouldn’t need the Law. What I mean is this: The Law is an external restraint on behavior. It comes from the outside and sets limits on what you can and can’t do. So, in that sense it’s like the walls of a prison that keep inmates from doing what they are otherwise inclined to do. That God gave his people the Law proves that in their hearts they weren’t inclined to behave in the ways he requires. Sin is a condition of the heart and mind, not necessarily one of outward action. So if you need a Law imposed, it shows that you are by your very nature a violator of that Law. If you weren’t, you

wouldn't need the Law. So okay, maybe these Jews were model prisoners in the Lord's legal penitentiary; but they were prisoners nevertheless. Calling themselves righteous by their efforts to obey the law was the precise equivalent of paying tribute to their conqueror and calling themselves free.

And the most important thing to see here is that both are self-deceptions – which reveals sin's strongest hold over us: its power to deceive. Or, say it another way, the sinful mind is first and foremost the deceived mind. It believes lies. And the trouble is that all of us have one. Our minds are deceived first with respect to the temptation to sin. The sinful mind truly believes that doing something wrong will be better or more rewarding than doing what is right. And while there may be short term gains, the truth is that in the end it never works out that way. Either in time or certainly in eternity every sin has a price connected to it that must be paid. And that price will always be far greater than any fleeting benefit that the sin allowed you to enjoy. And yet we keep on sinning thinking that somehow that inviolable rule won't hold the next time around. Is that just stupid, or what? The second way the sinful mind is deceived is with respect to what to do about sin. It looks at the Law of God and says, "Well, I messed up there. I shouldn't have done that. I guess the way to make it up is to obey the Law the next time around." That's kind of like a person accused of murder standing before the judge and saying, "Well, yes, I killed Mr. Jones – ah, but I didn't Mr. Smith who's still alive, you see? So, I'm not really a murderer." The sinful mind extends that way of thinking to all things: "Since I try to behave *most* of the time, I'm not really sinful." It then misappropriates the Law that the Lord gave for one purpose, namely to show you how sinful you really are, and uses it for another purpose: to convince yourself of how good you are.

These are the deceptions that the Jews listening to Jesus were steeped in. And it's why nothing Jesus said to them seemed to make any sense. They believed lies. He was speaking the truth. They thought good things about themselves. He offended them with the negative things he kept saying. They thought they were free. Jesus told them they were slaves. They called themselves the sons of their father Abraham. Jesus called them sons of their father the devil. They firmly believed they were going to heaven. Jesus warned them they were headed straight for hell. They thought themselves the experts in God's Word. Jesus told them they didn't even qualify as students. And it happened in the end, as the eighth chapter of John comes to its close, there are no more believers in Jesus among the Jews he was addressing. We read that they picked up stones to kill him – so Jesus left them. And with him went his Word of truth while they smugly continued to believe their lies.

The loss was theirs, of course. But the mistake we would make – indeed that many people within the Christian Church have made since the beginning – is thinking that somehow we are different than them. That mixed bag that made up the crowd that I mentioned at first, it's not a bad description of how, in each one of us, our own hearts and minds are divided. On one hand we've got the part that by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit firmly believes in Jesus and the salvation he suffered and died to secure for us. On the other extreme, there's the old sinful nature that alternately leads us into temptation *and* that soothes our consciences with the lie of our own goodness. It seems to me that most of the time the real battleground is that part of the mind in between, the part that's confused and that might go either way. It resonates with some of the things Jesus says; but other things he says it's not so fond of. Indeed, we find them quite offensive.

The question is which way will we go? Which side will win out in the battle today – because that’s the way this battle is fought: one little skirmish at a time. Which way will we go? Well, you’ve probably heard what the fellow who organized dogfights said when asked which of the two dogs that were up next week, he thought would win the fight (and no, I not condoning dogfighting; I’m just borrowing an expression). He said the dog that would win was the one that got fed.

The same is true of us. Our spiritual battles will be won by the side that gets fed. And the thing to understand about the sinful nature is that it’s self feeding. It’s always taking care of itself. So, if you don’t do anything at all, you can be sure it’s getting along just fine and growing fat and strong—and in the process pulling you deeper and deeper into the prison of sin’s sweet deceptions.

But Jesus said, “If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Jesus calls us to be his true disciples of his Word. And a disciple is by definition a student: that is, someone who knows that he doesn’t know the answers, who is willing to accept that a lot of what he thinks is wrong, and who therefore listens to the Teacher to hear the truth. A true disciple is one who *listens* to the Teacher, who wants to hear more of what the Teacher has to say, and who is steadily growing in the knowledge of the truth – without, I hasten to add, ever for a moment entertaining the thought that he or she has become a master of the material. If that mistake is made, you stop listening. You don’t need to. You know it all already. And this is what has happened in the history of the Church over and over again. It’s why Israel didn’t listen to the prophets sent by God, why the Jews didn’t listen to Jesus, why the Western Church didn’t listen to Luther, and why so many baptized and confirmed Lutherans don’t see any need to hear the Word anymore: they know it all already – or at least enough of it (they think) to get by. But if they’re not in the Word, if they’re not steadily hearing it, then they are showing that they are not true disciples, that they don’t know the corrupting and deceptive power that sin has over their lives – and therefore that they no longer have or adhere to the truth that sets them free. I can’t say it any more plainly than that.

We understand grace alone: the truth that God’s salvation for us comes only from his goodness and love, and is in no way merited by us. We understand faith alone: the truth that complete forgiveness and eternal life are ours in Christ Jesus by trusting in what he did on the cross for us, and not by anything we might possibly do or accomplish. May the Lord in his mercy give us the grace to fully understand Scripture alone: not just the truth that we may not add or subtract from it with pious traditions, inspiring stories, or human philosophies; but also the truth that the Word of God alone is the means by which the Holy Spirit creates, feeds, strengthens, and preserves our faith in Christ, so that firmly believing this we will with all our hearts desire to remain in the Word – to hear it, to read it, to meditate upon it, and to discuss it – and in this way be true disciples who know the truth that sets us free. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!