

I feel like I need to preface this story by saying that I generally do not get bent out of shape about people using or not using my title. I can tell when someone is doing it to intentionally be disrespectful, and that's not often. So please, the take-away here is not that I'm scolding any of you or asking any of you to be more conscientious about calling me "pastor." That's not the take-away. Sometime in the early months of Covid, one of the synod committees arranged a Zoom meeting so one of our pastors who is also a therapist could speak about the stress and anxiety of trying to care for a community that is used to spending time together in the midst of a global crisis that kept us apart. The committee member who was monitoring the Zoom welcomed people one by one as we joined the call. After a few minutes, when it was about time to begin, the presenter said to the facilitator, "Do you realize that every time you greeted one of your male colleagues, you said, 'Good morning Pastor' and used their last name, and every time you greeted one of your female colleagues, you said, 'Good morning' and called them by their first name and used no title." And immediately, they said, "No I didn't!" But a chorus of us nodded our heads and said, "Yeah, you did." Self-reflection and acknowledging unpleasant truths: that's never been a strength of human nature.

In John's gospel, Jesus is not speaking to the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, priests, or any of the people we usually find arguing with Jesus, either in good faith about honest theological questions or in an attempt to trick, discredit or entrap him. Here he is speaking to disciples who have heard his teaching, witnessed his signs, and come to believe that he is God's anointed servant, revealing in word and deed God's good intentions for the human community. They are on the right track, and Jesus says to them, *if you continue in my word...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*. He could have kept going and said, *the truth will make you free, but first it will make you mad* because that's what happened. Jesus goes on to talk about bondage to and freedom from sin, but at first, his followers seem to hear his offer of freedom not in terms of spirituality but as a practical reality and an affront to their identity. *We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone!*

It's true that God's covenant with Abraham was part of Israel's origin story; but so was the whole book of Exodus where God rescues the people from slavery in Egypt and leads them through the wilderness for 40 years into the Promised Land. When they got there, they were *supposed to* be free; the Law provided for them to be free; God wanted them to be free; in fact, God wanted them to be a shining example to all the other nations of how a free and equal society could work. But instead of being the unique *model* for all the other nations, the people decided they'd rather be *like* all the other nations, and they demanded a king like all the other nations. So, just as God warned them they would, the kings created a ruling class and essentially enslaved their own people. Having strayed from God's vision, their society became corrupt, divided, weak, and an easy target for foreign powers. The descendants of Abraham *had* been slaves, to almost everyone: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and, as they are having this conversation with Jesus, they are still suffering under the oppression of Roman occupation.

We might wonder how these disciples could be so selective in remembering their past...but haven't we spent the last several months celebrating 250 years of freedom in our nation when we know it wasn't 250 years of freedom for everyone. You weren't free if you arrived chained on a ship from Africa and sold to a plantation owner; you weren't free if your indigenous tribe was forced ever farther west and restricted

to a reservation; you weren't free if your parents came from Asian and you were held in an internment camp during World War II; you weren't free if you were a woman who wanted to vote, hold a job, or own property. When we tell the stories of who we are and how we came to be, whether it's our personal stories or the stories of our identity as a community, we tend to leave out the true but unflattering chapters. Yet Jesus says the truth will make you free.

Although we cycle through different versions of it, we almost always begin worship with confession and forgiveness. The traditional setting, the one we used today, says it most plainly: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive only ourselves, and the truth is not is.* We might not like to admit or talk about or dwell on sin, but indignantly claiming that we are free from it doesn't make it so. Confessing *that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves* is the truth that Jesus promised would make us free. We don't need to justify ourselves; we can't justify ourselves. We are justified by God's grace through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. That forgiveness, God's gift of grace, is good news, we could say the best news, but it doesn't sound like news that we need to hear at all if we have deluded ourselves into believing that we're already free from sin, or that we're at least free from the big sins, or that we're freer than those people over there who are more obviously sinful. None of us are justified by our own deeds; it's the son who makes us free indeed.

This passage and all the readings today are solid gold nuggets of scripture, foundational to our understanding of the relationship between God and humanity; we read these same verses every year for Reformation Day. But I almost wish they weren't appointed today, so we don't accidentally read them from the unhelpful perspective—that we are descendants of Martin Luther so we have always known the truth and we have never been slaves to any bad theology. It's still Jesus who saves us, not our theology, however good or truthful. The Reformation began by re-focusing on that truth: that we have all fallen short of the glory of God, so we have to be justified by *God's* grace and not *our* works. That was a good start, but we're not done.

I don't like to say that we “celebrate” Reformation Day but that we “observe” it, not only because a lot of strife, division, even violence resulted from the historic reformation, and we shouldn't be celebrating that, but also because Reformation should not just be an event or an era of the past that we remember. Jesus said, *if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.* If you *continue*...Luther wasn't done when he nailed the 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. The church wasn't done when the confessions were written down 500 years ago. We're not done because we claim the heritage and tradition of the Reformation. Jesus calls us to *continue*: to continue to confess where we have wandered off his path, to continue to receive God's gift of forgiveness, and to continue to be re-formed again and again, all our life long, until we more closely mirror the image of God in which we were created, loving and living for *all* people. If we ignore, revise, or deny the truth, we can't see where we need to be re-formed, not only in our relationship with God, but in our relationships with others, for the sake of those around us and for the good of the world. We can't welcome the gift and responsibility of freedom if we refuse to admit how we've been enslaved. May God continue to show us the truth, and, confident that we have been set free from sin, guilt, and grave, may we boldly go forward to live more fully lives of faithful discipleship.