

Abiding in the word

Bible reference for sermon text John 8:31-36

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?"

Grace peace and mercy are ours through the Triune God who is always reforming his church. Amen.

Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday, a day when we remember that the church is always being renewed by the Holy Spirit. On this day, over 500 years ago, a German monk named Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle



Church in Wittenberg.

He wasn't trying to start a new church; he was calling the existing one back to its roots—to the heart of the gospel, the message of God's free grace in Jesus Christ. Luther's act of courage began a movement that reshaped Christianity and changed the course

of history. But Reformation Sunday isn't just about what happened in the 1500s. It's about what God is still doing now—reforming, renewing, and setting people free through the living Word of Christ.

Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." These words have echoed across time—quoted in courtrooms, preached in churches. "The truth will make you free." But the freedom Jesus speaks of isn't the kind of freedom we usually imagine.

For the people listening to Jesus that day, the word "freedom" sparked resistance. "We are descendants of Abraham," they protested. "We have never been slaves to anyone." It's an ironic claim. Their ancestors were enslaved in Egypt, wandered the wilderness, and even in Jesus' own time lived under Roman rule. But Jesus wasn't talking about political or social freedom—though those things matter deeply. He was speaking about a deeper captivity, the kind that no empire can create and no government can fix: the bondage of the human heart, the enslavement of sin, fear, pride, and separation from God and neighbour.

This passage begins with a subtle but important detail: Jesus is speaking to “the Jews who had believed in him.” In the Gospel of John, that phrase doesn’t refer to all Jewish people but to “the Judeans,” those connected to the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem. Jesus’ ministry began in Galilee—among ordinary, overlooked people from the wrong side of the tracks. The Judeans, representing the religious elite, often struggled to accept his radical message of grace and inclusion. Yet John reminds us that even among those who believed, there was division. Some had once followed Jesus but no longer did.

Jesus sees this and offers not condemnation but invitation: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.” The word “continue” can also be translated “abide.” It’s a favourite word in John’s Gospel. To abide means to remain, to stay, to dwell. There’s a difference between believing and abiding. Belief is the spark; abiding is the steady flame that keeps the light alive. Believing is saying “yes” to God’s promise once. Abiding is saying “yes” over and over, especially when faith feels hard or far away.

Abiding in Jesus’ word means more than listening to his teaching. It means letting his presence shape our lives—trusting him enough to follow, even when the path winds through uncertainty. In John’s Gospel, abiding implies faithfulness, endurance, and intimacy. It’s about relationship, not mere understanding. Discipleship, Jesus says, is not defined by intellectual agreement or moral perfection, but by the willingness to stay grounded in the Word who became flesh and continues to dwell among us.

When we abide in Christ, we discover the truth—and that truth, he promises, will make us free. In John’s Gospel, truth isn’t an abstract idea. Truth is a person. Jesus says later, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” To know the truth, then, is to know him—to live in relationship with the living God revealed in his words, actions, and love.

The freedom that Jesus offers is not escape from life, but a deeper way of living within it. It’s not detachment from the world, but engagement with it. It’s freedom from the things that distort our humanity: fear, greed, ego, despair, and the endless striving to earn God’s love. Jesus invites us to a kind of freedom that begins with the realization that grace has already claimed us. Freedom is not self-sufficiency—it’s belonging. It’s the liberation that comes from knowing we are loved beyond measure.

On Reformation Sunday, that word—freedom—resonates with special power. The Reformation began as a struggle for freedom, not political but spiritual. Martin Luther stood before the powers of his time, not to destroy the church he loved, but to call it back to the truth that makes us free. He began his Ninety-Five Theses with these words: “Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light.” Love for the truth—that was his motive.

To be Lutheran, at its heart, is to be people who are always reforming, not because we enjoy conflict, but because we seek faithfulness. The church, Luther insisted, must

always be *ecclesia semper reformanda*—a church always being reformed by God’s living Word. We are not people who claim to have arrived at the truth. We are people continually set free by the truth—free to question, to doubt, to listen, and to seek God’s presence anew in a changing world.

Luther’s most profound insight was that we are *simul justus et peccator*—at the same time saint and sinner. We live in freedom and bondage all at once. We are forgiven and yet still learning to live as forgiven people. Grace doesn’t make us perfect; it makes us honest. It gives us the courage to tell the truth about our condition and trust that God’s mercy is greater than our failure.

Luther wrote, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Freedom, in other words, isn’t a license to do whatever we want—it’s the freedom to love, to serve, to give ourselves away for the sake of others. In Christ, we are freed *from* sin so that we may be freed *for* love.

The Reformation was never just a theological debate—it was a pastoral and social revolution. Luther’s protest was against anything that enslaved the human soul—whether guilt, fear, or the selling of salvation. He believed that every person, not just clergy or kings, had direct access to God’s grace and the right to read and interpret Scripture. That belief reoriented human dignity itself.

Today, we face our own forms of bondage. The idols of consumerism, nationalism, racism, and greed keep us captive. We live in what some call “routines of unfreedom”—systems that exploit workers, degrade creation, and normalize inequality. Even when we resist, we often feel trapped in habits too deep to escape. But Jesus’ promise still holds: “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

Freedom begins not when society changes overnight, but when our hearts awaken to the truth that God’s love is already breaking chains. It begins when we tell the truth about what holds us captive—our fear, our indifference, our complicity—and when we choose to abide in Christ’s word long enough to be changed.



That’s why the Reformation is not a museum piece to admire. It’s a movement to continue. It’s the Spirit’s ongoing call to repentance, renewal, and reform—for the sake of a world God loves so much. Luther’s hammer may have struck the Wittenberg door five hundred years ago, but the

reverberations continue every time we dare to ask: What truths have we ignored because they make us uncomfortable? What freedoms have we withheld from others because they threaten our privilege? What reforms is the Spirit calling us toward now?

Perhaps the next Reformation won't be about theology alone—it will be about justice. Perhaps it's about reforming the church's complicity in racism, economic greed, or environmental destruction. Perhaps it's about reimagining community in an age of loneliness, and rediscovering grace in a time when worth is measured by productivity. Whatever the form, the Reformation begins as it always has—with the Word that calls us to abide.

Abiding in Christ means letting grace reorder our lives until freedom becomes our rhythm. It means trusting that God's truth is not a set of doctrines to memorize but a living relationship that transforms how we see the world and one another. When Jesus says, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free," he's not offering information but transformation.

Freedom is not a one-time gift; it's a lifelong practice—the daily work of remembering who and whose we are. It's the practice of abiding in Christ's love when the world tempts us to abandon it. It's the practice of trusting that grace is stronger than sin, that truth is deeper than fear, and that love is greater than any power that would divide or diminish us.

Reformation Sunday reminds us that the Word is still alive, still speaking, still reforming the church and the world. The same Spirit that moved Luther to write and speak now calls us to act—to love the truth enough to bring it to light, even when it costs us something. The same Christ who promised freedom to those who abide in his word still offers that freedom to us: freedom from fear, from self-centeredness, from despair; freedom for compassion, for courage, for community.

So as we remember the hammer on the Wittenberg door, let us also remember the hands of Christ knocking at the doors of our hearts—not to accuse, but to invite. Not to condemn, but to free. Because the Son—our Saviour, our Truth, our Life—still speaks these words to us: "You are my disciples. Abide in me. And you will be free indeed."

"Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page

<https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>