

A Church Still Becoming

Bible reference for sermon John 8:34-36

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'?" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday. We remember Martin Luther and the movement that challenged the church to rediscover the good news of Jesus Christ. But the Reformation is more than an event in history. It reminds us that the church is always being called to listen, to learn and to grow in faithfulness. Perhaps that is what it means to be a church still becoming: a community that trusts God's grace enough to keep listening, even when what we hear invites us to change.



Our starting point is the promise Jesus gives us in today's Gospel: **"If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."** This is the heart of the gospel. We do not earn God's love by becoming better people or getting everything right. Christ sets us free. God's grace comes to us as a gift, before we have earned it and before we have put everything right. We are loved and forgiven because of what Christ has done for us. When our identity rests in God's grace rather than our achievements or reputation, we do not need to pretend we have all the answers. We can admit that we have more to learn. We can acknowledge mistakes without believing they define us. We can listen to difficult stories without assuming they threaten everything we hold dear. Grace gives us the freedom to listen.

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."** We are called to listen to Jesus' word, allowing Scripture to shape and challenge us. We are also called to seek truth through the experiences and stories of others. Listening is not always easy. Sometimes we hear what we expect to hear. Sometimes we listen only long enough to prepare our response. And sometimes another person's story challenges our understanding of ourselves, our congregation or our church. Yet Jesus promises that the truth can set us free. We need not fear the truth when we are held by God's grace.

Jesus speaks about the ways sin can hold us captive. Sin is not only about individual mistakes. It can also become part of our habits, relationships and institutions. Sometimes we continue doing things because they are familiar, without asking whether they reflect the

love of Christ. Sometimes we miss something important because we have not listened carefully enough. Jesus invites us into a different way of living, shaped by truth, humility and the freedom of God's grace.

This was also at the heart of the Lutheran Reformation. In 1517, Martin Luther, a German monk and university teacher, challenged the promotion of indulgences. He was concerned that people were being led to believe that God's forgiveness could be secured through religious and financial transactions. His Ninety-Five Theses invited debate about the church's teaching and practices. Luther wanted the church to proclaim the gospel faithfully. As he studied Scripture, particularly Paul's letters, he came to understand that people are made right with God by grace through faith for Christ's sake. God's acceptance is not a prize for achievement. Forgiveness is not something we purchase. Good works matter, but they are the fruit of faith and love, not the price of God's favour. Grace is a gift.

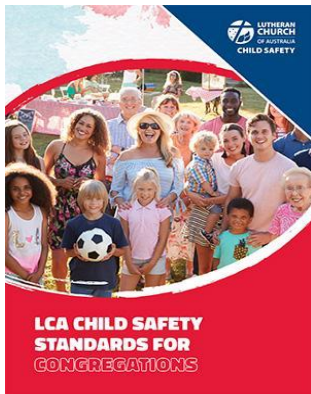


The Reformation reminded the church that it must continually return to Scripture and ask whether its teaching and practices help people hear this good news. Traditions can carry great wisdom, connecting us with generations of Christians who have prayed, worshipped and served before us. But we must keep listening to Scripture and asking how our life together reflects Christ's grace. Luther himself was not perfect. In later life, he wrote antisemitic works that contributed to a shameful history of Christian hostility towards Jewish people. We can acknowledge his contribution to Christian theology without excusing these failures. We can receive gifts from the past while being honest about its shortcomings. No person or generation has the whole truth worked out. We all need God's grace, and we all have more to learn.

A phrase associated with the Reformation is ***ecclesia semper reformanda*** — **the church must always be reforming**. This does not mean changing everything simply because it is old, or assuming everything new is better. It means remaining open to God's word and Spirit, willing to examine our life together and ready to respond when we discover a better way to serve our neighbours. Sometimes that discovery begins by listening to someone whose experience is different from our own. Imagine a person with a painful wound. They may cover it because looking at it is frightening. But the wound does not heal simply because it is hidden. It needs attention, care and time.

Communities can have wounds, too. Some people have experienced exclusion, spiritual abuse or other harm within the church. Their stories may be difficult to hear, particularly when we love our church and know the many good things it does. We may feel the urge to explain or defend. But listening means allowing someone to tell their story without rushing to silence them or protect ourselves from discomfort. It means being willing to learn something we might not otherwise have understood.

For those of us who attended District Synod a few weeks ago, we were reminded of the need to acknowledge the sexual abuse of children within institutions, including churches and other religious organisations. The National Redress Scheme was established following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. It recognises survivors' suffering and provides access to redress, including counselling, a personal response and a monetary payment. The scheme reminds us that children were abused in places where they should have been safe. Survivors deserve to be heard with compassion and supported without having to protect an institution's reputation. Redress is an important step towards justice, but an apology or payment cannot erase what happened. Churches must continue listening to survivors, protecting children and ensuring abuse is neither concealed nor repeated.



Thankfully, our church and others are addressing these concerns through training and safeguarding practices. And each of us has a role to play. When you give your time to Safe Church training or complete a Working with Children Check, you are doing more than ticking a box. You are helping build a culture in which children are safer, boundaries are respected and concerns can be raised. These processes may sometimes feel like a rigmarole. Yet they are practical expressions of love for our neighbours. The culture of the church changes through the decisions we make, the questions we ask and the care we offer.

Reformation is not only something that happens at synods or through decisions made by church leaders. It happens through ordinary people choosing to listen, learn and act faithfully. You and I are part of that work. We can listen when someone raises a concern, take our training seriously, speak up when something does not seem right and support changes that help our church become safer and more compassionate.

Listening and truth-telling matter beyond our church walls, too. In Australia, we need to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and acknowledge the truth of our history, including dispossession and the suppression of cultures and languages. Churches have sometimes participated in or supported practices that caused lasting harm. We cannot move towards reconciliation without listening to First Nations voices, acknowledging injustice and learning from experiences that have too often been ignored. Truth-telling asks us to be humble enough to recognise that our understanding of history may be incomplete. Reconciliation requires more than words; it calls for respect, listening and action. In all these situations, listening means being open to the possibility that another person's experience can teach us something important about where we need to grow.



Jesus sometimes called the religious leaders of his day “hypocrites”. The Greek word refers to an actor playing a part. His concern was that outward appearances could become more important than the deeper life of faith. People could appear devoted to God while missing the mercy and love at the heart of God’s purposes. Jesus was not simply trying to condemn them. He wanted them to know the grace of God. He challenged them because he wanted them to turn towards the generous love he came to reveal and experience the freedom God offers.

That same invitation comes to us today. We do not need to perform perfection or defend every decision the church has ever made. We can be honest about where we need to grow because God’s love does not depend on our ability to get everything right. So, what might reformation look like in our congregation? It might begin with listening more carefully to Scripture and allowing its message of grace to shape our choices. It might mean making room for people whose experiences have not always been heard. It might involve taking safeguarding seriously, supporting survivors or changing a familiar practice because we have discovered a better way. Most importantly, it begins with each of us recognising that we are not merely spectators watching the church change. We participate in its life and witness. The way we listen, speak, serve and respond to others helps shape the community we become.

We will not always get everything right. We will need patience, forgiveness and courage. But we do not undertake this work to earn God’s love. We undertake it because we are already held by that love. That is our hope as Lutherans. We are not saved by the strength of our institutions, the perfection of our leaders or the success of our reforms. We are saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. And that grace frees us to keep listening: to Scripture, to one another, to those whose stories challenge us, and to the Spirit who continues to guide the church.

May we be a church that listens with humility, learns with generosity and changes with courage. May our traditions point us towards Christ, and may our actions reflect the love we proclaim. May each of us play our part in making our church a place where people experience safety, welcome, forgiveness and hope.

The Reformation is not finished. God is still at work among us, calling us back to the gospel and leading us into new possibilities for faithful service. For Jesus promises, “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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>