

John 8:31–36

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³They 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'?"

³⁴Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever.

³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

“If the truth be told...” Four years ago we marked the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. For a moment, attention returned to a Wittenberg church door in 1517. But my, how times have changed since Luther stood before that door! Things are a lot different now. Martin Luther faced a medieval church that powerfully dominated and pervaded its culture. It was a church that loved being a force to be reckoned with...and feared. The church’s presence was at the center of everything; and the church’s power was to hold consciences in bondage to the threat of eternal damnation and torment. In that world of spiritual terror, Martin Luther voiced the truth of God’s grace and love in Christ Jesus – the truth which would free terrified consciences from slavery to endless and vain churchy works that could never satisfy God or be “good” enough for salvation. The Church needed to be reformed and recast. It was no longer to be the agent of the self-serving power to dominate; it was to be the agent of the Gospel’s power to liberate troubled sinners from despair and to serve the Lord in cheerful and selfless charity.

That was then, but his is now. The Church in our culture increasingly occupies a much different place. If the truth be told, we’re not at the center anymore; increasingly we’re being moved to the sidelines or the fringes of modern life. Instead of being a force to be reckoned with, the Church is often viewed as out of date, stumbling, and just rather quaint. It’s not that there’s so much ill will directed towards the Church; it’s just that many honest people wonder what difference we really make, or if we even make one. Still others question the Church’s usefulness in helping people address the complicated issues of a culture so much more sophisticated and advanced. Some even think we are an impediment to a person’s healthy understanding of oneself and one’s times. Far from being that dominant force in peoples’ lives, today’s Church is treated like a doting grandparent, to whom one is polite, but whose time is past, and whose values are out of date and antiquated. People are nice to us, but not very tuned in to us. When it comes to the place the Church occupies in our culture, the truth hurts a bit, doesn’t it?

Anxiety over the Church’s perceived loss of status leads many denominations to try to be trendier, and to champion the latest version of social consciousness. And so the world may notice what do-gooders we are, but will it really catch on to the Gospel that’s so good for us? I tend to doubt it. Other denominations tend to dig in and deny that things have changed. They want to fight the sixteenth-century conflicts between Rome and the Reformers over and over again, as if five centuries have not brought all that much change to the Church. So the world may notice what heritage makes us proud, but will it catch on to the living Gospel that gives us purpose? Again, I tend to doubt it.

Reformation always begins with the voice of a truth that challenges both the Church's idolatry of status and its anxiety over power. This voice tells the Church that its power never lies in who it thinks it is or in what place it has in society. The Church's true power always lies in what has been given to it. "If you continue in my *word*, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." The Church's status is quite frankly irrelevant; the Gospel the Church proclaims is the only thing that really matters *and* that makes all the difference. Reformation begins with the voice that in one way or another tells the Church to "let go, and let God!"

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Wow, sounds great, doesn't it? But what's the very first response to Jesus' voice of reformation? "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free?'" They cannot see their own bondage; they refuse to recognize the slavery they're under. What a thing for Jesus' hearers to say! "We don't need freedom." Those Jews were now a conquered people living under the heel of Roman occupation and oppression. Their forebears had been taken as slaves into Babylonian captivity for 40 years. And have they forgotten that the "descendants of Abraham" were for generations impotent and pathetic slaves in Egypt, where they were treated cruelly and harshly? "We...have never been slaves." You see what our pride in status and heritage does? It tries to keep us from seeing the truth of our bondage.

To free the enslaved descendants of beloved Abraham, the LORD God first had to get them beyond "de Nile." And I'm not just talking about the river, am I? The first thing the truth has to do is to get us beyond *denial*. Do you need to be made free? Slavery seems such a shameful thing, doesn't it? We don't want to admit to being slaves. But to free us, the first thing the truth has to have is the power to get us beyond denial. Do you need the truth that will free you from all the lies, the false promises, and the addictive illusions that our culture spins?

Jesus' hearers needed the truth, but they didn't want the truth. They wanted their views of their history, their image of themselves, and their pride in their status to be true. Jesus' hearers needed the truth, but they didn't want the truth. What about you and me? We need the truth, but do we want the truth? Which side of "de Nile" are we on? Do we yearn for the truth that will free us? Or do we think we already know the truth we want, and are happy with...our bondage to the Lie, the false image, or the sin we like? We live in a world that has enslaved so much of our hopes and thinking, dreams and ideas. We live in a world that desperately needs the truth, but is so afraid of the truth that frees. Do you need to be made free to put away the bottle, or the pills, or the bets - free to love someone who is so different - free to move beyond the cycle of lies and the shackles of shame or hurt?

The world wants to powerfully distract us from our bondage, so that we will keep denying it. When his hearers deny their bondage, Jesus proclaims the reality of our slavery: "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." The first thing the truth has to do is to get us beyond "de-nial". And nothing has had more power to break people's denial than that – the Cross of Christ. At least that's been my experience. How about yours? How can one face the Crucified Christ and not realize how messed up we are? We did this; we let this happen; we human beings were complicit in the horrible crucifixion of the only Son of God. This isn't the god who just has to like us and the way we live. This is the God who loves us even as Jesus had to die because of the way you and I

live. Nothing has the power to break our culture's rampant denial of sin and death like the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Reformation happens when the Spirit moves the Church to present Jesus Christ not as the therapist you need for your stressed lives, nor as the coach you need to reach your life's goals...even though this is exactly what's happening in so many churches today. Reformation happens when the Spirit moves the Church, even on the sidelines or the fringe, to lift up Jesus Christ as the crucified Savior we need and the true gift of God's grace. Reformation happens when the Spirit moves the Church to get its people talking in their own words about what it means for them to face the awesome Cross of the Crucified Christ. Not too many people want to hear the likes of me anymore; they need to hear you!

"If the Son makes you free..." Folks, Jesus frees! The shame Jesus bears, naked on the cross, takes away all of yours. You are free from whatever shame has been holding you back from the honesty and change that you've been needing. Jesus frees! All that God-forsaken despair the crucified Jesus endures frees you for real hope in the God who never forsakes sinners. Jesus frees! All the real dying and death Jesus faces frees you to live with courage and faith. Jesus frees! All the hate that Jesus, nailed to that cross, just has to take and take and take...takes it all out of you, so that you're free from all the festering hatred of this age, and can love and forgive and love and respect and love...as He loved us. Jesus frees! Stand before the Cross; fight to put its meaning into your words; and claim the freedom to speak...the truth!

That terrible Cross is never the virtual reality we want; it is always the raw truth we need. The Cross is God's truth that gets people beyond "de-nial" of sin and death and out into the wild and liberating journey of grace. The medieval world was close to denying the freedom of God's grace; but our world is close to denying the bondage of its real sin. The Cross of Jesus reforms the Church in whatever world because it is the naked truth that moves us beyond denial and into the hands of this awesome God. Reformation happens when the Spirit moves *this* church to face the truth hanging right in front of us, and moves *you* to continue in Jesus' Word and to speak up with the Gospel in your own words. Reformation happens in this church whenever the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen Christ moves us beyond denial of our sin and wrong and to the wild fringes of freedom in God's grace. If the truth be told, it's time for us to let go and let the Lord. Spirit of truth, move this church!