

Jeremiah 34: 8-17  
Psalm 46  
John 8: 31-36

Reformed by the Truth  
October 30, 2016  
Mary R. Brownlow

Jesus said, "If you continue in my word...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. St. Augustine said "Our freedom comes when we subject ourselves to the truth." Mark Twain said, "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything."

All of these men have something to teach us. Mark Twain might be telling us more about lying than about speaking the truth: we can all think of examples of people reconstructing events based on a lie, which then unravels as they try to hold the edifice together with plausible details. Interestingly (at least to me) the Greek word that Jesus uses in the Gospel of John is *A-letheia*, which means truth, but literally "not forgetting" or "not concealing." So truth starts with a clear and honest memory of and exposure of the past. The Hebrew word for truth, *emet*, on the other hand, has a more complicated definition. The most common sense of the word is reliability or faithfulness, as an attribute of God or as in a reliable testimony. For the Jews of Jesus' time, this faithfulness was expressed as a covenant with their Creator God. We still say occasionally in English: "He was true to his wife," meaning both honest and faithful.

We call today Reformation Sunday because tomorrow is the 499<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's dramatic action: the nailing of a document on the doors of the Wittenberg church, listing 95 grievances against the Catholic church practices of that time. We might say that he wanted clarity and truth and faithfulness to the Gospel message, and he saw those things being perverted by the all-powerful church. What we call (with a capital R) the Reformation, was not in Luther's mind at that time, however. He did not imagine a second autonomous church alongside of the Roman Catholic Church. He wanted renewal for the Church and all Christians. Only later, long after Luther had died, did his followers use the term "The Reformation" as we do today.

In every generation we are called to reformation and renewal by the truth that is revealed in our time. Jesus himself seemed to seek a reformation of the Jewish religion in his day: he engaged regularly in conversation with Jews of various beliefs systems, with varied expressions of piety. In today's passage, he spoke with Jews "who believed in him." When we hear them say, in response to his offer of freedom, these words - "We are the descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone" – we have to raise our eyebrows at their selective memory. *Never* been slaves? What about the slavery in Egypt, what about when your ancestors were taken captive and oppressed by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and, wait, now it's the Romans. You were formed by slavery – slavery and liberation are both in your DNA. What do you mean, the descendants of Abraham don't need freedom? We need some honest reflection here, some uncovering of both past and present.

I turn to a story in the book of the prophet Jeremiah to do a little sleuthing about the formative past of the Jewish people of Jesus' time. Back around 600 years before the time of Christ, Jeremiah spoke words in very troubled times. These prophetic words were both diagnostic and prognostic, warning of both the problem and the likely outcome. The problem: people were not

faithful to the covenant their ancestors had made, at the prompting of Moses, with God in the wilderness. In simple terms, covenant says: if the people were faithful and honest in their service of God, God would be faithful and honest with them. God asked them to fulfill obligations to their neighbors: a series of many commandments about justice and compassion. The people broke these time and time again, usually out of greed and lust for power. Human nature hasn't really changed, by the way. Like us, they were dishonest and duplicitous. And there were disastrous consequences.

One of the ancient commandments had to do with slavery. Slavery was seen in some ways as a necessary evil. People who were desperately poor might sell themselves into slavery, or indentured servitude, for a time. But a Sabbath rule said that all those people had to be set free every seventh year – a way to prevent inherited servitude, or a slave class. It was a socio-economic reset button, probably not always honored, but an ideal to which the nation could aspire. In addition, a king could make a proclamation of liberty on special occasions, like upon ascending the throne, or as an act of thanksgiving or repentance. In the passage read today, Jerusalem was being attacked by the armies of Babylon. The Judean King, Zedekiah, makes a covenant, a sacred agreement with the populace, and orders all the slaves to be set free, and they are. Maybe he just wanted to swell the ranks of the defenders at the walls. But then, the proclamation is reversed, and the poor people are re-enslaved. This is almost worse than ever – this reversal of covenant is taking the Lord's name in vain. It wrecks havoc with truth, it breaks the most sacred rules. Only the worst outcomes are possible now. In a biting tone, God speaks through Jeremiah, saying that he will grant freedom to the Judeans all right – he will give them the freedom to be defeated by the sword, to die of pestilence, and to starve in famine. A hard kind of liberty: the liberty of disconnection, defeat, and disaster.

When Jesus offers his disciples freedom through truth, he is asking them to look clearly at the ways they and their forebears – and by extension, we are our forebears - have misused power. These days, we pride ourselves on having done away with ancient, archaic practices, such as slavery. But Jesus is not talking about American 18<sup>th</sup> century slavery, or the Hebrew slaves under the Pharaoh, or slaves in the Roman Empire. He is talking about the sins that come from the misuse of power. Like the disciples in the passage today, we would like to resist the idea that we are implicated in slavery. And like them, we would close our eyes to history, to the continued effect that American slavery has on our society, or to human rights abuses that stem from our actions abroad. Despite the best efforts of many, despite national and international laws that are passed to prevent abuse of power, the imbalance – the unjust power and privilege that keeps some people down – still exists. We have only to think of migrant farm workers, underage sex workers, child soldiers and drowning refugees to know that slavery has not been eradicated.

The truth is that we are both slaves and slaveholders at the same time. We are caught up in systems that seem to be beyond us, that cause us to jockey for a position of power, or at least survival. Jesus exposes the human sin of power-grabbing by showing us another way. He calls us back to a covenant of honesty and faithfulness, a covenant made with God and humanity. When the broken power structures are cleared away, we find ourselves claimed and loved and yes, owned, by a gracious God. This is the paradox of the freedom of the Christian life. It is a call for continual renewal as we honestly examine and confess our cooperation with injustice and greed. It is truly liberating, because it inspires us to seek liberation for every other human on earth.

When we talk today about reformation and renewal, we need to ask questions: What do you want freedom *from*? What do you want freedom *for*? And *whom* do you want freedom for?

I started this morning with some useful quotes, and perhaps I will give you another from St. Augustine as interpreted by Martin Luther. Luther calls Christians “simultaneously saint and sinner” because he redefines “saint” as a forgiven sinner. According to Luther, sin (the condition of sin rather than an individual sin) is being curved in on self without a thought for God or the neighbor. And I would say that the root of sin is a kind of existential insecurity – a fear or anxiety that one is not sufficient, or safe, or worthy of love. And, the natural expression of that fearful state turns out to be putting other people down in a fruitless attempt to feel better than, safer than, stronger than, anyone else.

Where do we find freedom from this state of insecurity and the unhealthy abuse of power that it causes? Jesus tells his disciples that it is about relationship, a family relationship in the household of God. These followers will come to know the truth of this relationship over time, as they live with him and remain connected to him and his words. It is not a ritual, it is not a set of rules, it is a lifelong experience of reflection and action. These challenging words force us to consider what Jesus is saying to us, as those who profess to be followers as well. He is speaking to people who are apparent insiders, people who have been drawn to his teaching, not to people we can easily box as “those others.” Even believers resist discipleship, truth, and freedom. Jesus was proclaiming the Reformation of the first century.

What will we do with this kind of freedom – what do we want it *for*? The truth is, slavery is exhausting, emotionally and spiritually as well as physically. We want the energy that comes from losing the shackles of power and obligation. We demonstrate our sense of connection with God and God’s people, that holy relationship, with actions of generosity. We want energy for nurturing our young people. We want energy to comfort and teach children and elders. We want to have time to offer to local people in need. We want energy to change systems and structures that oppress those without power. Nobody orders us to do those things. They are a free response of a free people. People who have chosen to care. People who have chosen to give.

In our church, following the path of the reformers, we want the energy that comes from an honest look at the past – not so that we can idolize or idealize it as a more perfect time, but so that we can learn. We want the energy that comes from telling the truth and hearing the truth – the exercise of faithfulness and self-revelation that is based in divine promise. We want the energy of the covenant. We want our freedom. Thanks be to God. Amen.