

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

Reformation Sunday is a complicated celebration. What exactly are we celebrating? Should a Reformation Sunday sermon be a history lesson? A doctrinal essay? A half-formed conglomeration of both? Something else?

What I hope you hear in my message today is that any celebration of the Reformation, any celebration of what this church has been for the past 500 years has to be grounded in one simple thing: the truth of the gospel. The truth that tells us that we are loved and claimed by God over and over and over again...always.

What I love about this brief passage from John's Gospel – this snippet of the story that lacks a whole lot of setting and depth to what is an immensely complicated conversation about truth and freedom – what I love is that it fits so perfectly into every generation of the church. From the moment that Pilate asked Jesus the question, “what is truth?” through the Council of Nicaea 300 years later (and 1700 years ago this year), through the Great Schism of 1054 (when the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches were formed out of the original church), through the Protestant Reformation ignited in the heart of the Holy Roman Empire in the 1500s, through the turmoil of post-pandemic, internet-fueled modernity of today...in every time and place the question of truth is at the heart of understanding what God is doing.

In 1054, the leaders on either side of the Great Schism believed that they held the truth about God at work through the church. In 1517, a German Augustinian monk believed that he held a new truth about salvation by grace and not by deeds. In 2025...well we might not really know what the truth is anymore.

In a culture that is so drastically and firmly divided between opposing viewpoints, it is disheartening to try to start conversations when the two parties can't even agree on what may have factually happened.

Consider Jesus' conversation partners in this gospel reading. He tells the Judeans that the truth will make them free. To which they respond, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.”...

Abraham's descendants... the covenant people of God, the ones who were enslaved in Egypt, exiled and enslaved in Babylon, currently occupied and all but enslaved by the Roman Empire, tell Jesus they have never been slaves to anyone?!?!?!?

What is truth? What is your reality?

Martin Luther stood up to the power of the Holy Roman Empire – the enmeshed power of church and state that was intent on creating a truth born in church tradition rather than in the truth of scripture. And the course of church history was changed. You could argue that that change would've happened at some point without the printed words of Luther – and you'd probably be right, but history is what it is. Change came to the world in Wittenberg, Eisenach, Worms, and all over Europe...eventually all over the world. Luther and his contemporaries helped the world understand the truth just a little bit better – the truth that God loved them just because, the truth that they didn't have to earn that love, it was simply a gift.

We stand in that tradition. We continue to proclaim that truth to the world. The world continues to struggle with the idea that anything could be so simple. The world puts conditions on God's love just like it puts conditions on everything else. The world doesn't want to change. Ever.

But the truth remains. The truth sets us free. The truth of God's grace-filled, unconditional love is the start, middle, and end of the story. And the truth changes us. We don't always want to change. We don't always want to **be** changed. But change is part of life. Change is part of the church. Change is part of the gospel.

Our celebration of Reformation Sunday remains grounded in the idea that we are always reforming. The change never ends. We're not just looking back to the heritage we've been given – at the words of a Medieval theologian. We're asking questions of ourselves so that we continue to find ways to challenge the powers of this world. We continue to find ways to change how we reach the world to proclaim the truth.

And the truth remains. The truth of God's love is the center of the story. If we're not careful, we'll miss it. If we're not careful, we'll focus on the wrong thing. If we're not careful, we'll get stuck in the past and forget to change for the future – for today. The good news is God loves us anyway. Always. Amen.