

John 8: 31-36

THERE WAS A TIME IN MANY OF OUR LIVES, WATER WAS POURED INTO A BASIN AND THEN POURED OR SPRINKLED ON OUR HEAD. THE WORDS, "I BAPTIZE YOU IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT" WERE SPOKEN AS WATER FLOWED. A SIGN OF THE CROSS WAS PLACED ON OUR FOREHEADS. IN OUR LUTHERAN TRADITION WE SAY, "YOU ARE MARKED WITH THE CROSS OF CHRIST AND SEALED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT FOREVER." NOT JUST FOR THAT DAY. NOT JUST FOR THE GOOD DAYS OF OUR LIFE. FOREVER. ON THAT DAY AND IN THAT SAVING ACT OF GOD'S LOVE FOR US, WE ARE CLAIMED AS GOD'S CHILD FOREVER. GOD COMES TO US IN BAPTISM AND SAYS, "I LOVE YOU. YOU ARE MY CHILD, FOREVER."

TODAY, PRESTON WILL STAND BEFORE US, HIS HOME CONGREGATION, AND MAKE PROMISES TO GOD THAT HE WILL CONTINUE TO CELEBRATE AND LIVE HIS LIFE IN CHRIST. NEW LIFE THAT BEGAN IN HIS BAPTISM MANY YEARS AGO WILL CONTINUE TO GROW AND DEEPEN IN WAYS THAT EXTEND WAY BEYOND HIS LIFE ON EARTH.

TODAY WE HEAR IN JOHN'S GOSPEL: THE TRUTH WILL MAKE YOU FREE. THE TRUTH. IT WAS AT JESUS' TRIAL, AFTER JESUS TOLD HIS ACCUSERS THAT HE HAD COME TO TESTIFY TO THE TRUTH..THAT PILATE FAMOUSLY REPLIED "WHAT IS TRUTH?" AND THEN, PILATE PROCEEDED TO HAVE JESUS CRUCIFIED, EVEN THOUGH HE DIDN'T BELIEVE HE WAS GUILTY OF ANYTHING BUT BECAUSE IT APPEASED THE CROWDS. "TRUTH", PILATE ASSUMED, REALLY WASN'T ALL THAT IMPORTANT ANYWAY. SOUND FAMILIAR?

OBVIOUSLY, WE ARE NOT THE FIRST GENERATION TO HAVE DEEP DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT WHAT IS TRUE AND WHAT IS NOT. IT IS CLEAR THAT WE ALL CAN'T AGREE ON THE FACTS THESE DAYS, BUT AS IT TURNS OUT....WE HUMANS NEVER COULD. AND WE STILL WONDER, LIKE PILATE DID, IF TRUTH REALLY HAS ANY MEANING AT ALL...IF WE CAN REALLY KNOW "WHAT IS TRUTH?"

BUT JESUS' CLAIM THIS MORNING IS THAT TRUTH DOES MATTER BECAUSE THE TRUTH SETS US FREE. AND WHAT IS TRUTH? WELL, IT TURNS OUT THAT THE ANSWER IS STANDING

RIGHT IN FRONT OF PILATE. JESUS. JESUS IS THE TRUTH. JESUS SAYS HE IS “THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE.”

YOU SEE, THE TRUTH ISN'T A LIST OF FACTS OR REALITIES..THE TRUTH IS JESUS. HIS WORD..HIS LIFE, DEATH AND RESURRECTION..TESTIFY TO THE TRUTH. THEY BEAR WITNESS TO A DIFFERENT WAY OF BEING IN THE WORLD...A NEW WAY OF SEEING THE WORLD.

IN THIS WORLD, THAT IS SO TWISTED BY HATE AND DISTRUST...WHERE SUSPICION AND DEFENSIVENESS AND ANGER ARE COMMONPLACE..JESUS SHOWS US A DIFFERENT WAY..THE WAY OF TRUTH AND LIFE. JESUS SAYS---THAT STRANGER..THE SAMARITAN..THE LEPER...THE GENTILE..THE TAX COLLECTOR...THE OUTCAST...IS YOUR NEIGHBOR. LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR. LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR EVEN IF THEY ARE YOUR ENEMY. FORGIVE THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING. THAT IS WHAT IS TRUE.

IN THIS WORLD SO TWISTED BY GREED...JESUS SHOWS US A DIFFERENT WAY. JESUS SAYS MONEY ISN'T THE MOST IMPORTANT THING. THAT IS NOT WHERE YOUR SECURITY COMES FROM. IF YOU THINK IT IS...YOU SHOULD PROBABLY GIVE IT AWAY..SO YOU CAN LEARN TO TRUST GOD. BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT IS TRUE..AND IT MATTERS.

IN THIS WORLD, THAT IS SO TWISTED BY PEOPLE'S DESIRE FOR POWER...JESUS SHOWS US A DIFFERENT WAY..THE WAY OF TRUTH AND DLIFE. JESUS SAYS..THOSE WHO SERVE ARE GREAT. THOSE WHO PUT OTHERS FIRST REVEAL THE AWESOME POWER OF GOD. DON'T LOOK AT THE BIG SHOTS IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT GOD IS UP TO....LOOK DOWN. YOU'LL FIND THE TRUTH.

IN THIS WORLD, THAT IS SO TWISTED BY GUILT AND SHAME AND JUDGMENT AND BLAME AND FINGER POINTING..JESUS SHOWS US A DIFFERENT WAY. JESUS SAYS—YOU ARE BORN OF GOD'S SPIRIT. YOU ARE PART OF GOD'S HOLY LIVING PRESENCE IN THE WORLD....YOUR LIFE STEMS FROM GOD, LIKE A BRANCH FROM A VINE. YOUR ROOTS ARE GOD. YOU ARE SO LOVED BY GOD...THAT JESUS WAS WILLING TO SUFFER ON A CROSS FOR YOU. YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN. THAT'S THE TRUTH. NOTHING ELSE.

TODAY WE CELEBRATE REFORMATION SUNDAY. THE DAY 506 YEARS AGO A YOUNG PROFESSOR NAMED MARTIN LUTHER CHALLENGED THE ACCEPTED RULES AND STANDARDS OF THE CHURCH BY TACKING A LIST OF 95 REASONS TO THE WITTENBURG CHURCH DOOR ON WHY THE CHURCH SHOULDN'T SELL INDULGENCES. AT THAT TIME, THE CHURCH WAS TWISTED BY POWER AND GREED, AND USED FEAR AND GUILT TO COERCE PEOPLE TO GIVE MONEY TO "BUY" FORGIVENESS AND ETERNAL LIFE WHICH THEY SOLD AS "INDULGENCES." YOU COULD LITERALLY BUY YOUR FORGIVENESS. AND BASICALLY, MARTIN LUTHER JUST SAID NO. THE CHURCH WAS ENSLAVING PEOPLE...WHEN THE TRUTH WAS THAT JESUS, WHO IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH, WHO IS THE ONLY REASON THE CHURCH EXISTS...CAME TO SET THEM FREE. AND LUTHER WANTED TO REMIND THEM OF THE WAY OF JESUS.

HOWEVER TO LIVE FREELY IN CHRIST ALSO MEANS FREE WILL. WE MAKE CHOICES. CHOICES ABOUT OUR FAITH...ABOUT OUR DISCIPLESHIP. THE OLD JOKE ABOUT HAVING BATS IN THE CHURCH WAS TO CONFIRM THEM AND THEY WOULDN'T COME BACK. IT APPEARED THAT CONFIRMATION TO BOTH STUDENTS AND PARENTS WAS LIKE A GRADUATION...A COMPLETION OF THEIR FAITH FORMATION. CHECK THAT OFF THE "FAITH-TO-DO" LIST.

PRESTON AND I HAVE COVERED MANY TOPICS IN CONFIRMATION AND HAVE REFERRED TO THE SMALL CATECHISM TO HELP US LEARN ABOUT THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, LORD'S PRAYER, APOSTLE'S CREED, BAPTISM AND COMMUNION. WE HAVE STUDIED THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS. BUT CHURCH IS NOT A SHOULD. FAITH IS NOT A SHOULD. GOD IS NOT A SHOULD.

LAST WEEK WE HEARD ABOUT THE DISCUSSION JESUS HAD REGARDING GIVING TO GOD WHAT IS GOD'S AND GIVING TO CAESAR WHAT IS CAESARS. THIS IS NOT AN EASY TASK. GIVING TO GOD WHAT IS GOD'S SOUNDS NICE, BUT LET ME TELL YOU, GIVING TO CAESAR WHAT IS CAESAR'S IS A LOT MORE FUN. AND HERE IS THE THING ABOUT THE CHURCH. IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN ENTERTAINING SERMON, YOUTUBE OR NETFLIX WILL ALWAYS BE MORE APPEALING. IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR FOOD THAT TASTES BETTER THAN BREAD AND WINE, ANY RESTAURANT HAS BETTER. IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR SUPER FUN EVENTS,

FAMILY PROGRAMMING, SDSU ATHLETICS, THEATRE, WOODBINE MUSIC EVENTS, OR OUR LOCAL SCHOOL'S BANDS, ATHLETICS OR EXTRA CURRICULAR CAN DO MORE THAN WE CAN.

THE CHURCH IS JUST NOT AS COOL AS THE WORLD, AS COOL AS CAESAR'S STUFF AND SO THE CHURCH WON'T BE ENTERTAINING ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU COME. GUILT WON'T BE ENOUGH TO GET YOU OUT OF BED ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. BECOMING REGULAR CHURCH ATTENDERS THE NEXT SUNDAY AND THE SUNDAY AFTER THAT IS SOMETHING YOU WILL HAVE TO WANT TO DO.

AND SO WHAT DOES THE CHURCH HAVE TO OFFER? WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU WANT TO COME INSTEAD OF FEELING LIKE YOU SHOULD?

THE WORLD, THINGS LIKE SCHOOL, SPORTS, MUSIC, SOCIAL MEDIA. THINGS LIKE POWER, MONEY, SECURITY, CONTROL..THESE THINGS ARE TRYING TO TELL US THAT WE GET TO DECIDE WHO WE ARE. THAT WE CAN BE ANYTHING WE WANT. A PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE, AN ENGINEER, A DOCTOR, THAT WE CAN BE RICH, ALWAYS YOUNG, NEVER SICK, FAMOUS, INDEPENDENT, ALWAYS IN CONTROL. BE WHATEVER YOU WANT!

HERE AT CHURCH GOD DOESN'T LET US DECIDE WHO WE ARE, BUT TELLS US WHO WE ARE. GOD TELLS US IN BAPTISM THAT WE BELONG TO GOD. THAT WE ARE CHILDREN OF GOD AND THAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT IDENTITY WE HAVE. IN COMMUNION, GOD TELLS US THAT WE ARE MEMBERS OF THE BODY OF CHRIST, OF THIS FAMILY OF FAITH THAT GATHERS HERE AT PIONEER LUTHERAN. GOD TELLS US WHO FAMILY IS, GOD GIVES US BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN FAITH, WHO ARE THERE FOR US WHEN WE STRUGGLE, THERE FOR US WHEN WE CELEBRATE, THERE FOR US IN DAILY LIFE.

IN GOD'S CHURCH, WE ARE WELCOME NO MATTER WHAT. WE DON'T HAVE TO BE POPULAR, WE DON'T HAVE TO ACHIEVE ANYTHING. IN GOD'S CHURCH, WE HEAR WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US, WE HEAR HOW JESUS IS WORKING IN OUR LIVES, AND WE ARE PROMISED THAT WHEN WE FAIL, WHEN WE ARE BROKEN AND SUFFERING, AND WHEN WE DIE, THAT GOD IS THERE PUTTING US BACK TOGETHER, GIVING US NEW LIFE.

I WAS CONFIRMED ON A SPRING DAY IN 1978. WHEN I SIGNED UP FOR THE CLASS THE YEAR PRIOR, I HAD NO CLUE WHAT CONFIRMATION WAS. IN FACT, I THOUGHT THE WORD WAS CONFORMATION. I CAN STILL SEE THE YELLOW DRESS I WORE THAT SUNDAY MORNING AND THE RED CARNATION EACH STUDENT RECEIVED. THE PASTOR COMMUNICATED IN HIS EXCITEMENT THAT CONFIRMATION WAS A BIG DAY, RELATIVES WOULD BE IN WORSHIP AND AFTERWARDS FAMILIES WOULD CELEBRATE WITH MEALS, CAKES AND POSSIBLY GIFTS. OUR LITTLE CHURCH WOULD BE FULLER THAN USUAL. I LIVED ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE CHURCH, SO GETTING THERE WAS NEVER AN ISSUE BUT BECAUSE OF THE CLOSE PROXIMITY I HAD ASKED MY PARENTS IF THEY WOULD WALK OVER FOR THIS SERVICE. MY DAD ASKED HOW LONG THE SERVICE WOULD BE AND IF HE COULD LEAVE WHEN THE CONFIRMATION PART WAS OVER.

I HAD AMAZING PARENTS..CHURCH JUST WASN'T THERE THING..BUT HE WAS THERE THAT MORNING IN THE BACK PEW. I DIDN'T HAVE A FAMILY PARTY BUT I DIDN'T MISS IT BECAUSE THE DAY WAS PERFECT IN EVERY WAY. +IT WAS THROUGH CONFIRMATION I LEARNED THAT I WAS WELCOME NO MATTER WHAT, THAT I WAS PART OF THAT FAMILY, I BELONGED THERE AND I BELONGED TO GOD. AND WHEN ALL THOSE CAESAR THINGS OF THE WORLD, THOSE THINGS THAT WOULD FAIL ME TIME AND TIME AGAIN, IT WAS IN THAT SMALL CONGREGATION I WOULD ALWAYS BELONG, THEY WOULD ALWAYS BE MY FAMILY, AND WOULD ALWAYS LOVE ME. IT WAS HERE THAT GOD WOULD ALWAYS TELL ME WHO I WAS. AND I HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN.

THIS FAMILY OF FAITH, THIS BODY OF CHRIST, IS WHERE YOU GOD WILL ALWAYS TELL YOU WHO YOU ARE, PRESTON. YOU WILL AFFIRM TO LIVE FREELY AS GOD'S CHILD IN THE WORLD AND TO LOVE THE WORLD THAT GOD LOVES. YOU WILL AFFIRM YOUR FAITH IN JESUS..IN THE MIDST OF ALL THE CHAOS OF THE WORLD...ALL THE VOICES THAT CLAMOR FOR YOU TO BE A CERTAIN WAY OR DO CERTAIN THINGS OR BELIEVE CERTAIN PRINCIPLES...YOU WILL LISTEN TO THE WAY OF JESUS. YOU WILL TRUST LOVE, NOT HATE. YOU WILL TRUST HOPE, NOT FEAR. YOU WILL TRUST JOY, NOT DESPAIR. YOU WILL TRUST KINDNESS, NOT SUSPICION. YOU WILL TRUST THAT...WHATEVER COMES...YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD.

AND THAT IS THE TRUTH JESUS CAME TO TESTIFY TO..THAT WAS THE TRUTH LUTHER WANTED THE CHURCH TO REMEMBER. AND THIS MORNING, THAT IS THE TRUTH WE PROCLAIM. THAT YOU, PRESTON, ARE A CHILD OF GOD. YOU ARE FREE. YOU HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR. BECAUSE GOD HAS YOU...GOD HOLDS YOU...YOUR FAMILY AND YOUR CHURCH FAMILY ALL HAVE YOU...THIS DAY AND ALWAYS. AMEN.