

“We are free.”

John 8:31-36

Reformation/Confirmation Sunday

Pastor John Schwehn
Christ the King Lutheran Church
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“If you *continue* in my word, you are truly my disciples,” says Jesus. “And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

Now, I don't know about the rest of you – especially you educated confirmands – but when I hear Jesus say something like that, I immediately begin to wonder, “What in the world does *that* mean?” The truth will make you free? HUH? What is the truth? What is freedom?

I feel like the disciples in the story – they hear Jesus say this vague but profound thing, and they immediately say, “Excuse me, Jesus, but we're not actually slaves to anything or anyone. We actually *are* free already thank you very much!”

Yes, we are in good company whenever we ask this simple question: “What does this mean?” Because, unless we ask this question, the teachings of the faith, the words of Jesus, can turn us on our heads and make us feel strange or dull or, most likely, just downright confused.

In fact, it is actually part of our Lutheran tradition to ask this question: What does this mean? In the small catechism, Martin Luther asks this question of each and every one of the 10 commandments, of each and every part of the Creed, of the entire Lord's Prayer, of the sacraments.

And we might be tempted to look around the room we're sitting in right now and ask the same thing. I mean, seriously, what in the world are we doing here? What does *this* mean? I'm up here wearing a robe with some red fabric draped over my shoulders. We keep spontaneously sitting down and standing up, singing, praying, listening to old words being read out of an old book.

Let's be honest: It all looks a little...weird. What does it all mean?

So let's start with what we do know. “If you *continue* in my word,” says Jesus, “you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.”

So the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, somehow frees us. The Word of God – Jesus Christ! – reveals to us a truth so good, so powerful, so beautiful, that we are set free from all that we fear, all that burdens us, all that we don't understand or keeps us from loving one another.

It reminds me a little bit of a story I heard one time about horses.

A friend and teacher of mine named Mark Yaconelli tells the story of a woman he met named Jane who is a horse therapist. Jane takes in abandoned and abused animals, rehabilitates them, and then sells them to new, caring owners. She told Mark about how

some of these animals live cooped up in a dark barn for their *entire lives*, eating only oats out of a bucket and drinking water from a trough.

The very first thing that Jane does with these animals is take them out to a beautiful, green meadow on a sunny day and just lets them go free. Now, keep in mind that these horses have *never seen grass*, never seen a babbling brook, never felt sunshine. So what do you think the horses do?

Well, for the first night or two, they stay close to Jane, terrified of this strange new world. They sometimes go days without eating and drinking. Even though they're surrounded by hundreds of acres of green grass, these horses only want to eat those oats from a bucket. They've become so routinized to the buckets and troughs of captivity, that it's hard for them to see anything else.

But then, eventually, in a moment of desperation, the horses will start nibbling on that green stuff below their feet and they'll realize that *they are completely surrounded by food!*

Think about that. How that must feel! Jane says that, upon realizing this, the horses will begin galloping and kicking and running, going crazy with joy. They realize that they are, in fact, *free* in a big, beautiful world, and they can't help but dance and act silly out of pure and complete joy.

So those horses help me to think about what we are doing here, they make me think about us. Why do we need the church? What does it mean? Well, here's one reason why I think we are here: We are here because, although we are free in Christ, we need help remembering sometimes. Like those horses, when we come here and remember we're free, we do strange things: we sing, we offer praise, we dress in strange clothing, we sprinkle water on babies, we eat bread and wine and say that our very *salvation* is held in these small, ordinary things. How strange! What freedom!

Because, after all, it can be so easy to feel not free, trapped within our routines, our fears, our anxiety or stress or grief. Think again about those horses: Like them, our lives can become closed off and dark, and we find security only around those few people in our inner circle. We don't risk relationship with others.

When this life is disrupted, we feel afraid. For some of us, there's the overwhelming grief and lament at the loss of something we have come to know. We fixate on the past and become blinded to future possibility. We blame others, we become angry, we behave as people without faith, people who have forgotten the truth of our freedom.

And this is why this community needs you, confirmands. We – all of us, this church – we *need* you. You point us towards a future wherein you are the church, you are the dreamers and the lovers and the faithful followers who will lead us forward. Today you become full, adult members of this church, and we can't wait to hear all that you have to say: your continuing questions, your truth-telling, your many gifts.

So then...what IS the great truth that sets us free? And what does this truth MEAN?

Well, the truth is the Word of God, it is faith in Christ. It is God's steadfast and unconditional love. It is the simple truth that the very one who called every living thing – and the entire cosmos – into existence cares intimately and deeply about you. And that this God loved us so much that God became human, lived among us, and risked all of the messiness and heartbreak and joy that comes from any deep, real, human relationship.

Actually, at this time I'm going to call on the help of a few of our ninth graders to talk about this truth. After all, they have just completed a three-year process of asking the question, "What does this mean?"...and here is some of what they believe.

One of our confirmands writes in his faith statement, "I believe that in life and in death we belong to God, despite race, gender, social status, nationality, and even people of other faiths."

Amen! Despite all that seeks to divide us, we belong to God, in life and in death. There is nothing we can do to separate ourselves from this love. Continuing in God's Word reveals this most fundamental – and yet, most scandalous – truth. God does not build walls between peoples, God tears down the dividing wall!

In fact, the freedom we have in Christ does not depend on our having "correct beliefs," as though, unless you say the magic words or know the proper lingo, your faith doesn't matter. Freedom is not found within a belief system where we check all the boxes of what we know we're supposed to say.

Freedom is found in the fact that God has already checked *your* box, before you could even have beliefs. God has already decided that God believes in *you*, and you are so beloved.

Another wise confirmand writes: "I believe that grace is God's blessing that he gives to us humans to empower the Christian life."

Preach it, confirmand! Grace is this gift of God, where God comes running towards us in love even when it's hard for us to have faith, or when we fail to love God and one another as we should. And this great gift of grace, as our confirmand wisely pointed out, it empowers us to love one another in freedom. It goes with us *everywhere* – to school, to sports and music practices, at home – *everywhere*. Wherever we find ourselves, God is there, calling us to be his people in the world. It is a great responsibility and trust, but it is also always a gift.

Another thing our confirmation students understand is that this freedom that follows in the way of Jesus means sometimes doing really hard or unbelievable things. For example, forgiveness. One of our confirmands writes, "I think that since God forgives us, we can forgive too. I believe that forgiveness is huge, and without it we wouldn't be able to love one another."

Freedom means trusting in God's presence even in the midst of suffering. Many of our confirmands wrote in their faith statement that it was hard to understand how God could be present in the midst of the horrible things happening in our own world. These questions, these insights, they are today a part of our congregation, and I, for one, am so thankful for them.

Because, look around! All of you! We are God's people, fully free, fully belonging to one another. Like those horses eating grass for the first time, the good news today is that *everything you can see right now is a gift from God!* It is God reaching out to you in the faces of neighbors, in the reading of God's Word, in the music we offer, in the bread and wine and water. It is all for you. We are free. Thanks be to God!