

**Weekend of Sunday, October 31, 2021**

**23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Reformation Day/Lectionary 31/Proper 26/Year B**

**First Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**Second Reading: Romans 3:19-28**

**Gospel Reading: John 8:31-36**

**Sermon Title: “Renewed and Free”**

## **Theme**

*Jesus speaks of truth and freedom as spiritual realities known through his word. He reveals the truth that sets people free from sin.*

## **Text**

<sup>31</sup>Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; <sup>32</sup>and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” <sup>33</sup>They 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’?”

<sup>34</sup>Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup>The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. <sup>36</sup>So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

## Sermon

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther was a brilliant Augustinian monk, priest, and professor of Bible and Theology at the University of Wittenberg in Saxony, Germany. As a faithful member of the Holy Roman Empire – in other words, he was Roman Catholic - he struggled to reconcile the faith that was passed on to him by the prevailing culture of the time, and what he read and studied in scripture and taught to his students.

Frustrated with this disconnect, he wrote down his concerns and posted them, hoping to elicit discussion. However, the nailing of what became known as his infamous "95 Theses" to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany became an incendiary act. The act and author were seen as rebellious and set off a firestorm of activity that, over the next several years, changed the world. You and I, the members of this church are both the beneficiaries of Brother Martin's rebellious act and the guardians of this sacred trust.

In the Prayer of the Day, we prayed to God that God's Holy Spirit would 'renew the church in every age.' I want to say that that petition may be more appropriate today than at any other time, but, the truth is, being the church has never been easy. It continues to fight the prevailing culture of every generation. A Mighty Fortress it is, but not because our church buildings are mighty fortresses made of stone and brick, but because people like you and me fight the prevailing culture to preserve "it." And to be clear, the "it" I am referring to is the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the freedom it brings to the gathered people of God, who are always trying to live out their lives of discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

There are plenty of other activities to do on Sunday morning, but that is when the church gathers. And it does so because Jesus Christ rose from the dead on a Sunday, and so when we gather on Sundays, we commemorate his Resurrection.

What about Zion's Saturday worship? I don't know what the logic was at its inception, but I presume it was an attempt to reach non-Sunday worshipers, or maybe it was an attempt to do worship in a non-traditional style. Maybe it was this church's attempt to 'renew the church in every age.'

Now we have a video presence online. There is debate as to whether the video church is a good thing or not. It takes a lot of work to produce our online services, but they are watched between 30 and 200 times each service. Some of our folks who are concerned about going out into the COVID-19 world watch it, and because Zion casts such a large shadow, we have far-flung members and friends from all over the country, and from Northern Ireland, that watch, and we are the favorite at Brookdale Nursing Home in Austintown where Jeannie Price watches with pride.

It also takes a lot of people to produce our services – both the live in-person services and the online video service. But this isn't *work* for most people. It's ministry; it's how we live out our lives of discipleship.

Last week we heard some of the Lawson's list some of the ways they serve God and God's people. They think a life of faith lived out through this church is worthwhile.

This week we heard from the Bellin's – a multi-generational family. Ed is a life-long Lutheran from Wisconsin, who married his bride Judy and moved her to NE Ohio for his job with Packard Electric Division of General Motors. They raised two children, one of whom is Lisa, also featured in the video. Ed is a smart guy who planned for his retirement, which he did early under GM before the transition to Delphi. Shortly thereafter, Judy, Ed's wife, began exhibiting some unusual behaviors. It took a long time, but Judy was finally diagnosed with Pick's Disease, a kind of dementia similar to Alzheimer's. It affects parts of the brain that control emotions, behavior, personality, and language. I tell you this because I know Ed's story and it is not the happy ending he and Judy had hoped for, and yet, Ed never lost faith. He trusts that come what may, Jesus is still Lord and sits at the right hand of God and will judge him with grace and mercy when his day comes.

Lisa, Ed and Judy's daughter, has an engineering degree from the University of Cincinnati and followed her father in employment with Delphi. Lisa wanted to be a mother and so she conceived two children *in her heart*, first Landon and then Laina. Being a mother is a hard job every day. Being a single mother is a hard job every minute of every day, and while I think that Lisa probably thought her parents would be there to help, her mother Judy became the focus of her father Ed's attention until her passing. And then as luck would have it, before, during, and after her children came, Lisa lost one job after another, three times, due to corporate downsizing and restructuring – you remember those days. Lisa hadn't taken the time to reflect on

her spiritual journey until I invited her into this sermon. But now, having reflected, she said, "I'm humbled, but most of all, reminded of God's faithfulness. It's His blessings that inspire me to respond with obedience and persevere in faith." If Lisa and her kids are home, she and her kids are at church, worshiping and giving thanks to her God who has demonstrated faithfulness to her, and serving in whatever way she can. And she is raising her two children to do the same. Since Ed and Lisa have come to Zion, they can often be found in Crossroads while the children are in Sunday School, comparing calendars. Lisa is a great mother to her children and Ed is a great "Grampy" to them too.

How does Ed carry on with the loss of his wife, Judy? How does Lisa parent on with two active kids? I'm going to put words in their mouths because I have known them and observed them for 25 years. They live out lives of discipleship under the lordship of Jesus Christ. They have faith and hope, and that gives them the strength to persevere. In the Gospel Reading today, Jesus said, "*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; <sup>32</sup>and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*" The truth is, though they have been tested in ways most of us never will be, God in Christ has never turned his back on Ed and Lisa. They continue to follow him to this day and will until he calls them home. With Christian discipleship ordering their lives through the church, Ed and Lisa find purpose and meaning and fulfillment and hope – and Lisa wants that for Landon and Lana too. So it is no surprise to me that they were among the first families back when we re-opened in June of 2020. They know they belong here; we belong together.

My biggest fear during the pandemic has been that those who were never every weekend attenders, maybe never had a mature faith, would drift away and never come back. Time will tell. Those of us with faith, who *want and need* to attend every week just to get through the next week, are confused by this. They don't know what we know; they don't know God revealed in Jesus Christ as we do.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

So today is Reformation Day, the day in 1517, that Martin Luther nailed his infamous "95 Thesis" to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. This one rebellious act set off a firestorm that changed the world. You and I, the members of this church are both the beneficiaries of Brother Martin's rebellious act and the guardians of this sacred trust.

Just to be clear, that we are not worshiping Martin Luther, quoting from our Constitution, \*C2.07. *This congregation confesses the Gospel, recorded in the Holy Scripture and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessional writings, as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God's mission in the world.* "as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God's mission in the world." Aren't those awesome words?

We routinely get visitors from other church traditions and denominations. The one thing I hear repeatedly is that we are a welcoming congregation. I suppose they are talking about us, this congregation's people. But I think we are who we are and how we are because of that Lutheran influence. I know for me, I've always been on the rolls of a Lutheran church. Lutheranism is so ingrained in me that I honestly don't know how else to be. I think it's the same for many of you. Others who have come to us from other traditions and found us "welcoming" decided they liked it and joined us.

To be clear, I'm not knocking any other Christian tradition, I'm lifting up how you are, (you that are watching via video and you that are live in-person). Zion is a special place,

- not because of the building though it is the envy of many;
- and not because of our worship services, though the quality of our worship services is the best I've known;
- and not because of our Lutheran theology, rooted in the doctrine of grace, though it frees us from our sinful selves.

All those things contribute to an experience, but when we get visitors who worship with us in this soaring space, led by our musicians, instrumental and vocal, and hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached with an emphasis on grace, well, they often want to be a part of it.

Then they find out about all the social ministry and out-reach and in-reach we do and they often decide they want to live out their lives of discipleship with us.

This long-winded reason is why it is so important for Zion to "sustain" to quote our own Constitution.

Last week I reminded you that personal stewardship is a three-legged stool of Time, Talent, and Treasure. Each one of us has been given all three, not in equal proportion. I cannot sing like Stephanie Chizmar or Dan Mook, nor can I manage money like Art Roden and Steve Rogers. I don't have as much time to donate as many of you do – did you know Ed Bellin was a Trumbull County Community Star? They labeled him, "Mr. Volunteer." But I can preach and teach and administer a church. Some of you are burdened with much wealth, we are here to relieve you of that burden.

Seriously, our worship attendance at our live in-person worship services last month was 144, less than half of what we should be this time of year.

However, we are A Mighty Fortress. We must soldier on. We are the guardians of this sacred trust known as Zion Lutheran Church. We do too much good ministry for the community to fail. I trust that God will see us through, but God will do it through us; you and me. We are the ones God has blessed so that we can be a blessing. And finally, pray for those who have not returned yet. They belong here. We belong together.

### **Prayer**

Gracious Father, we your creation don't like change, but change seems to have always been part of your plan for your creation. Help us to recognize your handiwork in the world around us. And help us to recognize your providence. Give us grateful and generous hearts to persevere and prevail through this pandemic, and every day beyond. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen