

Reformation Year B October 31, 2021 Epiphany, Winnipeg
John 8:31-36

“And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

What is truth? The question came up at a Bible study this week as we looked at this reading from John and someone asked the obvious question. So what is truth? Everyone's wondered that some time. Even Pilate asks the question while Jesus is on trial. Jesus says “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” and Pilate asks the question that was just as obvious then as it is now: “What is truth?” Every pastor or teacher or parent or student or expert or friend or maybe just everyone has had to ask and try to answer the question.

What is truth?

There's a drummer named Mike Portnoy, and he and his old band - Dream Theatre - wrote a loooooonnnng song called the 12-Step Suite, or the Alcoholics Anonymous Suite. It's all about the ways he has lived with alcoholism, and it's about the hard work of recovery. At one point in the piece he writes about that time where someone in a 12-step program has to take stock of all the wrong they have done to anyone, and then confess to the people they have hurt. So Mike the drummer begins to write out a list of it all, and he dreads the task but knows it needs to be done. And then, once the list is written he ponders the dreaded task of confessing to the people he has hurt all the ways he has hurt them.

But then the fear begins to give way. He sings instead about the freedom he begins to feel as he confesses these things. He's free from always trying to hide, always making excuses, always the exhausting work of trying to pretend that nothing's wrong. He speaks the truth about his life. And the last words of the piece? “The truth shall set you free. The truth is the truth. That's all you can do is live with it.”

Maybe that's a piece of what Jesus is talking about. Not all of us have known what it is to live with addiction, but if you have I think you know that if you don't admit that there's a problem, if you're not speaking or hearing the truth about what's going on in your life, you'll never be free.

Speaking or hearing the truth is not easy and it doesn't just suddenly make everything OK. But I know this: When I lied to my parents one afternoon in Grade Five about where I'd been after school, the whole thing ate at me until I finally told them where I'd really been. I felt a little bit free then, because I didn't have this thing that I was carrying around inside me. I've got better secrets now and maybe I'll be free of them too some day, but for now I know how hiding or pretending will tie me up and will never loosen the knots. I'm guessing it's like that for us all.

"You'll know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Like a country that needs to admit it has a race problem before it can be free from its race problem, or like an NHL team that needs to hear and speak the the truth about what's gone on behind closed doors, or like a church or a family that needs to admit that it has done wrong...Like you or like me... There's something about honesty and truth that begins to set us free.

"You'll know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

That's why we began with confession today. We stood together and spoke the truth to God and to one another and to ourselves. We didn't go into details – that would take forever and would just be weird – but maybe for that moment we didn't hide, and we didn't pretend. We just came clean about the fact that we've hurt one another, we've hurt our neighbour, we've hurt creation. We just spoke the truth together.

And then we heard the truth that we are forgiven: that God doesn't hold all that against us, like a weapon, but sets us free to live a new way in a new day where we care for creation, and take care of each other, and work to make right the things that have gone wrong. Yes, we'll confess it all again and again because the need to be made free never ends; and yes, we'll hear again and again that the gift of being made free never ends.

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

Maybe the real question is not "What is truth?" but "Who is truth?" You might recall what Jesus says a bit later on in his travels with his disciples. They've just finished having supper together and they're out on the street again, walking to wherever they're going next. We know where the story goes from there, but those people on the road with Jesus do not. He tells them that he's going away and leaving them behind for awhile, so they're scared and confused. Who wouldn't be? They have followed Jesus and come to trust him, and they think that if he's not right there to lead them they won't know the way forward...just like it's hard to know the way forward in a pandemic and some day in a post-pandemic world, or in a world where lying has just become another form of communication; just like it's hard not to be afraid when exams are scary and you don't know how they'll turn out, or when the medical truth you've just heard leaves you feeling like everything is slipping away.

And then Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth and the life." Did you hear that? Right in the middle? Jesus says, "I am the truth." Jesus changes the whole picture because now the truth is not an idea, or a fact, or getting the words in the right order, or giving the right answer. It's not something you need to figure out if you want to be free. Now the truth is a person – Jesus - who makes us free by speaking the truth to us; Who

knows us so well and who loves us even when we try to pretend, or hide, or cover up; Who makes us free by giving us space to be honest without fear; Who loves us even when we are sure we're unloveable, and who loves all the people that we might declare to be unloveable; who speaks the truth and makes us free.

It's Reformation Sunday today. I think we all know that Reformation Sunday is not Hooray for Our Side Sunday, or Thank Goodness We Got It Right Sunday, or even Proud to Be Lutheran Sunday (although a Lutheran Pride rainbow flag might look kind of neat today). Sure, there are events that took place on October 31st, 1517, and there's a German monk named Martin Luther, and there's a whole history of being Lutheran that is sometimes honourable and sometimes awful, but being Lutheran isn't really the point.

Reformation Sunday like any Sunday is all about the good news that is at the centre of our life together. It's good news spoken on an autumn day five hundred and four years ago, just like it had been spoken for thousands of years before that day, just like we have spoken it – and sometimes forgotten it - ever since that day: good news that Jesus the truth lived and died and lives again to make everyone, even us, free. Free from having to hide, free from pretending to be something other than sinful and forgiven and loved, free from having to justify ourselves. Free to love God who always loves us, and free to love our neighbours as ourselves.

That's the Reformation good news; that's the good news of every day. Jesus the truth is always with us on the way, even when we don't know the way. Jesus the truth is always at home with us. The truth travels with us, and makes us free. AMEN