

“Constant Reformation and Knowing the Truth”

(John 8:32)

Reformation Sunday, October 27th, 2013

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. A highly influential figure in the Church of England, John Henry Newman stunned the Anglican community in 1843 when he left his position as vicar of St. Mary's, Oxford, to join the Roman Catholic Church. He was an accomplished theologian who desired to identify himself with the truest tradition of the Christian faith. In his mind the question was between the Anglican tradition which took its stand upon Antiquity or Apostolicity vs. the Roman tradition which took its stand upon Catholicity. That is the Anglican Church holds that its true church status comes through their holding to apostolic tradition whereas the Roman Church is confident in her fidelity based on the fact that they view themselves as never having left the original church itself. In the meantime -- in Newman's mind -- Lutheranism was a Protestant heresy (Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, New York: Dover Publications, 2005: 94).

It is perhaps somewhat understandable that the Lutheran Church might be viewed this way since we have *not* bound ourselves so much to the traditions Newman was concerned about *per se*, as much as our striving to rely on *the* apostolic tradition and *the* catholic foundation that both of the other two traditions also claim: the holding to the Word of God. But for us Lutherans we say a little more than the others do: we say “the Word of God **alone,**” is **the basis for our Reformation emphasis also known as *sola Scriptura***. We believe that nothing is *more* apostolic since it was this Word that the apostles themselves lived and died for; and nothing else is more catholic (as in representing the universal church) than this Word of God which true Christians throughout all ages have always confessed with their mouths and believed on in their hearts!

So on April 17th, 1518 Luther was ushered into the Diet of Worms at about 4:00 pm. “He was visibly awed by what he saw. There was Emperor Charles V himself, heir to a 1000-year-old empire. Near him on the raised dais were his advisers and the representatives of Rome. All around were Spanish troops decked out in their parade best. The rest of the hall was filled with the politically powerful of Germany – the seven electors, the bishops and princes of the church, the territorial princes, the representatives of the great cities. In the midst of this impressive assembly there was a table, piled high with books (Kittelson, *Luther The Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*, 160).” Those books were written by Luther and had gotten him into a lot of trouble to the extent that his very life was on the line at Worms. The books contradicted the evolving doctrine of the Roman Church. This was considered an insidious sin so in front of

all to hear, Luther's examiner declared, "you must give a simple, clear, and proper answer to the question, Will you recant or not?" Luther did answer, and it was an answer that, in his words, was without "horns or teeth":

"Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds and reasoning – and my conscience is captive to the Word of God – then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience."

He then added: ***"Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen*** (ibid, p. 161)."

This is what we know and confess as Lutheran Christians: the Word of God as our source of life and truth because it is that Word which reveals the Lord Jesus Christ our light and our life; and it is only Christ who truly reveals God and His heart towards us which is one of love and mercy leading us to the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life in and through His Son Jesus Christ. If you take away this Word, you take away Christ and if you take away Christ, you take away the only hope for sinners in a Gracious God.

But my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, what does it mean "to know?" It's easy to throw these words around. Some folks want to equate knowledge with awareness, but that won't cut the mustard when it comes to really knowing something. The word "know" is used for example to describe the intimacy between a husband and wife. It would be insulting to a wife for her husband to say that he was "aware" of his wife. Or – as another example – let's say someone asks you if you "know" how to do something. They are probably seeking out detailed knowledge and expertise. If a person's car breaks down and you come along to help and then you're asked if you "know" about fuel injection systems, it should be easy to answer that question. Most people would never say that they know fuel injection systems if they had simply heard of them. We are all to a certain extent, experts in that we know about something that we experience or do on a regular and frequent basis. This is true even of children who could teach many of us about a game or two that we would have no clue on how to play. This is real knowledge; it is intimate in that it is so familiar that it amounts to substantial insight into whatever it is being discussed.

Well this word "know" is the word Jesus used in our Reformation Gospel today in John 8:31-32: ***"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"***

Jesus is saying that there is something every disciple; every follower of Jesus just "knows." And he was not talking about sophisticated theology, but about what is most

important to know from the Word of God; that which is the very center of Scripture. Whether that follower of Christ is in high school, is a real estate agent, runs a restaurant, is a professional athlete, works at Cosco, Walmart or Target, is a preacher, a nurse, an attorney, or is a full-time domestic engineer, what all disciples of Christ have in common is this: they KNOW the teaching of Jesus; they know the truth!

Last Sunday I had an extended discussion with our confirmands that Jesus did not come to be a new law-giver or a new Moses. So many folks think that Jesus came to show us how to live so that in imitating Him we might save ourselves from sin. This is the single most popular and natural concept about Jesus. It is wrong. True disciples rather know the Gospel:

1. That **Jesus lived for us** to keep the Law of God in our stead.
2. That **Jesus died for us** to cover our sins with His blood.
3. That **Jesus rose for us** to have eternal life.

This is part and parcel the “truth” which our Lord spoke of in John 8. Truth is the ultimate and most important reality, and the greatest truth is not only that which is real, but also that which lasts. And the greatest truth is Jesus Christ Himself, the Incarnate Son of God. That is why when we confess the incarnation of Jesus Christ in the Creed, it is always appropriate to bow when we confess the mystery (now there’s a good tradition which points back to the Word of God)! We *know* the *truth* who is Christ when we know Him through His Word; and when this Word becomes our constant experience.

Luther wrote, *“Therefore I say that if you continue in My Word [Jesus says], you are truly My disciples. If My doctrine pleases you, you are well schooled and know everything. And if you persevere in the doctrine through cross and suffering, then you are My disciples. But My doctrine demands more than just an initial acceptance and much praise. I know that it is easy to believe in the beginning. But where are those who remain steadfast, who persevere, endure and say, ‘Let come whatever God send me! If I am not to be well, then I am satisfied to be sick. If I am not to be rich, then I shall be content to remain poor. Whether I live or die, I shall remain with Christ’ (Luther’s Works, American Edition Vol 23, p 393)?”*

Luther is describing a tenacity to the Word – this is what it means “to hold” to the Word, you cling to it like a bulldog clamps down on a steak – to really know the truth of the Word which reveals your Savior and you refuse to let go! But in this description by Luther, he is also bold to describe the true follower who may be rich or who may be poor. These words rub us the wrong way. After all, we live in a culture that says, “You can be anything you want to be!” *Really?!*

I absolutely love the game of basketball. I've played basketball all my life ever since I was a little boy and more recently I've coached some of my son's -- Bryan's -- basketball teams. But imagine if I had said early on that I was going to be the greatest basketball player of all time? After-all "I can be anything I want to be!" And though I was on the varsity team in my high school for two seasons, I didn't even *start* on that team much less come anywhere close to a college scholarship. But consider such a grandiose idea in terms of comparing myself to the NBA player who is currently considered the best in the league today, LeBron James, who might someday be hailed as the best ever: this guy has won the last two NBA championships, the last two Finals MVP's, four of the last five season MVP's, and the last two Olympic golds. Consider also the raw power and ability of this amazing athlete: his passes have been measured at traveling over 40 miles per hour and he has a release of 0.2 seconds which is twice as fast as the typical NFL quarterback; he can run 20 miles per hour in full stride and can cover the length of a basketball court in only 9 strides; he has a vertical leap of over 40 inches and has a maximum touch of 12 feet high. I'm a pretty big guy, but James has a hand width that is way over two inches longer than mine. His hands are gigantic; and his wingspan is 84 inches long which is four inches longer than Leonardo da Vinci's "ideal" Vitruvian Man (*ESPN*, October 28, 2013, 48 & 58). Now I ask you how realistic would it have been for me to assume that I could be whatever I wanted to be and actually be the greatest basketball player of all time with the likes of LeBron James running around? I might just as well aspire to be a top ballerina. I know: a disturbing thought!

Why all of this? Too often we want to tell God that we will not know what He says is most important to know until we can be what we want to be; until we can do what we want to do; and unless we can have what we want to have. We lose the priority of God's Word when we ask solely, "***What do I want to do with my life?***" Notice the problematic, sinful emphasis: what do I want to do with Myyyyyyyyyy life! Whose life is your life Christian? Your life belongs to the Lord. He made you, He saved you, and He sanctified you. Don't let this problem of self-centeredness block your knowing what is really important! When it comes to their jobs, 80% of all Americans either feel unfulfilled or ill-quipped. 1 out of 3 Americans hate their jobs. This is the reason why the highest heart attack and suicide rates are on Sunday nights and Monday mornings. Why? One reason is that we've stopped seeking to know, to really know the God who made us; to know, to really know ourselves – the way God made us with the gifts God gave us – and instead of approaching life in terms of how we may best serve other people (the reason we're here), we conduct ourselves as selfish children, "What do I want to do, what do I want to do, what do I want to do?"

We are rather called to find our “sweet spot” (see Max Lucado’s book *Cure for the Common Life: Living in Your Sweet Spot*). That is to find the talents God has given to you so that we are actually aware of our God-given gifts. They are not accidental nor are they incidental. Listen to what God once said to Jeremiah, *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations (1:5).”* One of my all-time favorite movies is the Academy Award Best-Picture *Chariots of Fire*. In that movie, the Christian runner rejoices in sincere humility that “God made [him] fast.” How has God made you dear Christian? What are you made to do? I can tell you this and there is no doubt; there is absolutely no question whatsoever that God has made you to do something in such a way and in such a fashion that is excellent and indispensable to the Church. It is not corny, but sublime biblical theology to say, *“You -- a child of God -- are indeed very special; created and empowered to do something in a way and in a fashion that marks you as gifted by God!”* And if you feel that you do know what this is, then worship Jesus and ask Him to show you. He will!

What does any of this has to do with the Reformation? Once upon a time, the church started conducting herself in a self-centered manner (in a sense asking herself what she wanted instead of what the Lord wanted). The Lord had given to His church the sacred tradition of the apostles that the early church had clung to. The Word of God itself testifies to this tradition: ***“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter (2nd Thessalonians 2:15, KJV).”*** Furthermore, 2nd Thessalonians 3:6 (KJV) warns against those who would stray from the sacred tradition: ***“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”***

And the most sacred tradition is to remain steadfast in the Word of Christ. But man-made tradition forsakes the priority of Scripture and the supremacy of Christ. Superfluous tradition; man-made tradition always has this tendency: It detracts from Christ and leads further away from His being the fixture of our eyes, the Author and Perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). And when it gets really bad, illegitimate tradition leads us to put our eyes on ourselves and when we do that, we consider only our frustration and we lose hope. The true disciple, however, quite simply remains transfixed upon Christ.

So Luther again on the true disciples: *“People would gladly believe in Christ if this could make them lords or confer kingdoms on them. But if it involves suffering, they will have no part of it, and faith is finished. Therefore Christ declares: ‘I am sure that you will not adhere to My doctrine.’ Fidelity in Christ’s doctrine is rare especially when people encounter an evil wind. To be sure, many become Christians and hold firmly to the Gospel at first; but then they abandon it, like these fellows in our text. This is reflected by the parable in the Gospel about the seed that fell on a rock. When the sun beat down upon it, it withered away (Luke 8:6). But those who stick*

to the Gospel are the true disciples. The others are false Christians and false brethren (Luther's Works, American Edition Vol 23, 393)."

The things that we really know are the things that we really love. People of God, love the Lord your God. Love Him. Disciples who love God long to hear His voice. They understand that He is the lover of their souls. They know that if everything else in life is falling apart, their Savior Christ will never leave them, never forsake them. That is true disciples love because Christ ***on account of God's gift of faith through the WORD to them which enables them to KNOW that Christ LOVES them! This is why the Word becomes so precious and so well known: through it we know WE are loved. This is why we thirst for the Sacrament, because through it, we RECEIVE Christ's love: His very body and very blood for us! This is why we rejoice in the Holy Absolution, because through it God's love is recast upon us through His Word imparted and imputed on us! So Luther continues, "We must progress to the point where we say: 'God has promised.' If we rely firmly on the Word, then we need have no fear. Even though we find ourselves at our wits' end and see no escape, God will nonetheless let us find out that His Word is true, because He has promised that none who trust in Him will be disappointed. This we, too, will find in all the trials and temptations of the future...Therefore Christ wants to say here: 'If you hold on to My Word, then stand firm; for you remain a true disciple of Mine by holding staunchly to the Word. Not only to know, learn, read, and hear the Word but also to experience it – this makes you a genuine disciple*** (Luther's Works, American Edition Vol 23, 400-401)."