

Sermon – John 8:31-36; Jeremiah 31:31-34
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
Reformation – Year A
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“But Now”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. As we were driving to school earlier this week, a commercial came on the radio, not for the first time. Two people spoke excitedly to one another about cash, and how one seems to be always short of it. Until now. Just go to such and such a website, one proclaims to the other, and hundreds of dollars in cash – cash! – are yours for the taking. Cash! As the commercial ended, one of the boys look at me and said, “That’s not real, is it? I mean, you’d have to give it back, right?” And while I won’t give this website free advertising from the pulpit of Grace by passing along domain or details, my son was absolutely right. Whatever you can get from the website, it ain’t free. It doesn’t take kids too long in this world to come to a simple understanding: If it seems too good to be true, it almost certainly is.
2. We humans have a tendency to seek the good – at least for ourselves – while preferring to have a looser relationship with the truth. Jesus has just proclaimed himself the Light of the World, the Son of Man who must be lifted up. And there are those among the crowd who hear and believe. They are eager to listen to Jesus speak of himself. The problem begins when Jesus begins to tell them about themselves. “If you continue in my word,” he tells them, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” Sounds good, right? Except for the simple fact that to need freedom means you lack it. And this is a truth about themselves they cannot accept. “We are

- descendants of Abraham,” they protest. When have they been enslaved to anyone? Talk about an exercise in self-deception. To be a descendent of Abraham is to be descended from slaves. And things haven’t been that great for them since the four hundred years of slavery ended. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, and most recently the Romans have all held God’s people under their thumbs. The people have been telling themselves a story of freedom but it’s too good to be true. They are in bondage, and not simply to Rome.
3. On this Reformation Sunday, we remember and give thanks for the work and witness of our theological ancestors. Martin Luther’s journey toward grace was grounded in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Luther firmly grasped Jesus’ theological point, that the bonds of sin have ensnared us all. But church doctrine and practice had begun to tell a story other than Jesus told, a story that was simultaneously too good to be true and too impossible to be anything but bad news. Whether by doing enough good works or, maybe better, giving enough money to the church, one had the power to gain salvation. Isn’t that good news? I have the power to do it myself! But as Luther knew all too well, this was an impossibility. Paul makes it clear. No human being will be justified by works of the law. Not you. Not me. No one. Is that the last word? As the reformers, and many before and since, remind us: No. Of course, we are not here on Reformation Sunday to celebrate the greatness of Luther or our Lutheran heritage, although I do love both hotdish and liturgy. We are here to celebrate what the reformers proclaimed: the utter goodness and graciousness of our God.
 4. So, Jesus proclaims, our bondage is not the end of the story. Now, God in Christ is doing the thing long promised. Now, God puts forth Christ to atone for our sins. Now, by grace as a gift, God the Son makes a place for you in the Father’s household forever. And with a place in God’s house forever, you are truly free. Free from sin, the devil, and death itself. And what will it cost you? What will you have to repay? What do you owe? Not a thing. And because

- Jesus is the truth, this isn't too good to be true. It's just good news. You are free. Freedom is living, as Luther said, not with one foot already in the grave, but one foot already out of the grave. In Christ, we are not moving inexorably toward death, but always into life.
5. Some of us found ourselves at a grave a few days ago. Karen Lemke, a faithful member of Grace, a friend of many here and a constant presence at our Cornerstones Bible study on Wednesdays, wanted to have her memorial service at the cemetery. Twenty or so people gathered there on the lawn among the grave markers. And, because Karen wanted us to, we sang. We sang out her favorite hymn, "All Creatures of Our God and King." With highway traffic speeding by and planes coming and going above us, we lifted our voices heavenward: *Let all things their Creator bless; Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son, and praise the Spirit, Three in One; Alleluia! Alleluia!* There among the headstones we were reminded of two very true things. First, yes, death is real. But second, death has already been defeated. This means not only that we have nothing to fear for the next life, when our baptismal journey is complete, and we take our place in God's household. It also means that we have nothing to fear in this life, for in Christ we are already living on the other side of the power of death, one foot already out of the grave.
 6. Alive in Christ, owing nothing in return for this gift of grace, we are invited into free and fearless living. We still live among the headstones in so many ways. From the growing conflict in Israel and Gaza to the war fields of eastern Ukraine to the heartbreaking scenes in Lewiston, Maine and North Lawndale, we know that this world remains in the grip of sin and violence and death. This world is in need of the freedom Christ offers. So go, and give Jesus to the world. You have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ calls you through these waters into vocations of peace and justice, that you would boldly bear God's creative and redeeming love to all

the world. Let this be the heritage of the Reformation, that we tell the truth, about God, the world, ourselves. We who once were dead in sin are alive in Christ. We who once were bound are free. Jesus isn't too good to be true. He *is* the truth, and it's nothing but good news. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.