

Sermon Reformation Sunday 2011-10-30
John 8:31-38

It was my first semester in college and in calculus class the professor had explained proofs by induction. We might all be familiar with deductive reasoning, where each step proceeds directly from the previous. If $a=b$, and $b=c$, then $a=c$... for many people that is familiar and easy. One moves from generalities to specifics by working through a series of reasoned statements. No problems there. Inductive reasoning is a little harder to grasp. With inductive reasoning you sort of work the opposite way. You start with specific observations and move to general statements. In the conventional story, Isaac Newton is supposed to have had an apple fall on his head which became the specific observation that kick started the thought process that led to the discovery of gravity. If that was really true, which is unlikely, then that is inductive reasoning.

On one of our calculus exams, the professor gave us a problem that had a person riding on a train through the countryside. On the train ride, the person saw different groups of cows, all of which were spotted. Then the person crafted a proof by induction that proved that all cows everywhere must be spotted. The actual details of the proof are unimportant because ultimately, we know that all cows are NOT spotted. What is interesting is that over half of the class (not me) agreed with the proof. Granted it was during an exam, and the stress might have been a little high, but seriously... agreeing with a proof that went contrary to reality? Some folks were just a little too close to the subject. Too focused on the methodology and process to see a bigger picture.

Sometimes, Christianity can be like that too. We can get incredibly focused on some areas and miss the bigger picture. It can happen in texts like today's text. We heard Jesus say today, "If

you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.” But other versions translate that same verse as “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.” I am dissatisfied with this second translation because it moves us into a way of thinking about our life of faith that narrows our vision and I think enables us to miss the bigger picture.

“If you hold to my teaching” reduces the mark of being a disciple of Jesus to a matter of checking the boxes off of a list. In the great tradition of Christianity we bear an incredibly rich theological heritage. All of it springs up out of Jesus’ life and teaching and the witness of Scripture. But those teachings can distract us. People can study the intellectual doctrines of the Trinity, the neo-Aristotelian metaphysics upon which transubstantiation is based, Augustine’s use of Plato, and so on... they can create lists of virtues to practice, study rhetoric to understand Paul, set up incredibly rigorous rules for living... all thinking that they are holding to Jesus’ teaching. And it might be just fine. But they might also get so caught up in and focused on the holding to those teachings that they miss the bigger picture.

“If you hold to my teaching” is not a great translation... even if we know how to translate... we might miss it. The reading we have is a little better, but I prefer “If you abide in my Word, truly you are my disciples.” Jesus uses two really loaded words here... abide and Word. If we were to start at the beginning of John’s gospel we would not have gotten out of the first chapter before we hit these two. In this first chapter, we would read first off, “The Word was with God and the Word was God.” And then a few verses later, we would hear, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The gospel of John identifies the Word of God as Jesus who comes and dwells

with us. To dwell in Jesus' Word is to live in communion with him, to engage in his identity.

The doctrine and dogma of Christianity all has a place for us... a very important place. But Christianity is not first and foremost a list of propositional truths that we must assent to. In a few minutes, we will welcome new members into our congregation. We will do that by using the rite: Affirmation of Baptism. In that we will recite the Apostles' Creed, recalling the faith in which we baptize. Now a few years ago, my wife's grandparents were joining a new congregation, not Lutheran but it doesn't really matter. They were each supposed to recite the Apostles' Creed. The pastor stopped them all while they were saying it. He turned to my wife's grandfather, "Henry, I didn't hear you say that section." He replied, "Well, I am not sure I believe it." At that point the pastor told him he needed to assent to that section or he couldn't join. He ended up not joining.

When Jesus says "you shall know the truth and the truth shall you free," again he is not talking about propositional truths. He is once again pointing to his own reality. In chapter 14, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life..." Jesus opens a new way of knowing truth, a relational knowing where truth comes and dwells with us. Jesus encounters people who are inquisitive about him "Where are you dwelling?" they ask him. "Come and see," Jesus answers. He doesn't ask them if they have it all figured out beforehand. Jesus doesn't ask us if we have it all figured out before he claims us. Jesus claims us hoping that over time as we come to know him, we will work on figuring it out. Jesus comes to us first. That is the heart of our transformation. That is the heart of our being made right with God, the heart of our justification.

And on any given day, we may or may not always believe everything that Jesus taught. We might doubt. We might question. But what we are continually reminded of is that Jesus longs for us to dwell with him. To follow Jesus is to dwell with him. To know his truth is to know him. Our justification is not based on our decision for Jesus or how well we know particular doctrines. Our justification is based on Jesus' decision for us. Our trust in Jesus is only possible because we are given the grace that we might believe. That decision opens us up to a life where we continually encounter Jesus in scripture, and sacraments and in our common life as brothers and sisters in the faith.

The heart of the Reformation, I feel that some might be vastly disappointed if I don't at least tip my hat to Luther, is that we are justified by grace, by nothing that we do. Luther is concerned first with the proclamation of what God is doing in Jesus. That is, Jesus puts us in a right relationship with God, with himself. And it is in that relationship that we are changed. We are changed bit by bit, as we live with Jesus, following him, learning from him, loving him, abiding in him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.