
WHAT IS THE LUTHERAN CHURCH?
Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost, 2017
John 8:31-32

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 8:31-32: ³¹ **Therefore Jesus said to those Jews who had become believers in Him, “If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There are many different Lutheran synods around the world today. Even in our own country we have the AELC, the LCA, and the ELCR, to name a few, and they do all have their differences. Even though there are differences between synods, I am sure that every member of each of these synods do not for a moment hesitate to call themselves members of the Lutheran Church. We could spend hours discussing the differences in doctrines between all the different Lutheran synods, but that is a subject for another day. Rather, the question we want to ask today is “What really is the Lutheran Church, as it was established many years ago?”

We begin by remembering that the Lutheran Church did not choose this name. Rather, it was thrust upon it by its enemies as a term of contempt. But the name which was intended to deter people from joining, became one of dignity and attraction. The Lutheran Church is the Church of the Reformation, or the Church which holds and defends the Bible truths which Luther again taught when he purified Christendom from man-made additions and doctrines. No Church can truly call itself Lutheran unless it stands for that for which Luther stood, and really, all the apostles and prophets, *that salvation is by grace alone, revealed in Scripture alone, through Christ alone, received by faith alone*. Actually, all true believers who maintain these principles are Lutheran in spirit, even though outwardly they may not belong to the Lutheran Church.

The Lutheran Church is not a sect, but the Apostolic Church, restored to its pristine purity in faith and life. Its creed is ecumenical; it accepts honestly and professedly the ancient creeds. It excludes and rejects all ancient and modern errors. The true Lutheran

Church is rightly exclusive and anti-unionistic.¹ While there are true members of the holy Christian Church also *outside* of the Lutheran Church, yet it is the orthodox Church on earth, the true visible Church of Christ on earth. It challenges all men to examine its teachings and to disprove its doctrines; but if these doctrines cannot be proved wrong, indeed, because they agree with Scripture, the Lutheran Church upholds the proud claim that it is the Church of the Bible, the Gospel voice. All these facts we must constantly bear in mind today, perhaps even more fervently, because there are so-called Lutheran churches among us which do not deserve this title of dignity. Within Lutheranism the demand is made that the Lutheran Church must become more liberal, more sectarian, and more unionistic.

Again, the growth of the true Lutheran Church is not phenomenal. We see that here in our own backyard. Though it preaches the Gospel in its full truth and purity, its membership remains comparatively small.

So there are many things at which even Lutherans sometimes are offended. Should we, however, be offended? Luther once said that all who are offended in him and his doctrine are offended in Christ and His Gospel. No, we must not be offended at the Lutheran Church, but confess and defend its vital principles and its holy doctrines with ever greater fervour and zeal. We must understand that true Lutheranism means a loyal adherence to the Word of God, and a clear understanding and profession of the truth of salvation.

In our text today we see Jesus speaking **to those Jews who had become believers in Him**. These Jews had only recently become believers, and their tender faith needed strengthening. They had come to know Jesus as the *Light of the world*,² and were earnest and sincere in their profession of Him. They faced much opposition to the Pharisees, who had hardened themselves against His Gospel. Their number was not small,³ but they needed strengthening of faith and confirmation of their resolve to follow Christ. What did Jesus demand of them? What rule of discipleship did He lay down for them? His words are simple: **“If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples.”**

Discipleship of Christ does not consist in outward things. Calling oneself a Christian, or performing outward acts, do not make a person a disciple of Christ. True

¹ Romans 16:17, 2 John 10

² John 8:12

³ John 8:30 “*Many* believed in Him.”

discipleship is inward and spiritual; it presupposes true faith in, and abiding loyalty to God's Word. A true disciple must learn the lessons the heavenly Teacher has taught us in His Word and cling and conform to them. In His school, the role is fixed and the doctrine established for all times; disciples must therefore accept unwaveringly this rule and doctrine. When speaking of this, Christ had in mind not only the divine Law; He wished to be accepted and adored not merely as an "ideal" or "example," but as the "*Light of the world*," as the "*Son of Man lifted up*." He had in mind pre-eminently the Gospel of His atoning suffering and death. Only moments before, He has said to them, "*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He*," (John 8:28). In that Gospel, which is foolishness and an offense to the world,⁴ His disciples must abide, continue, and dwell. That must be the foundation of their faith and hope, the holiest truth in which all their religious thoughts must centre upon. Jesus demanded a Church that is abidingly loyal to His Word, His precious Gospel. "**My Word**" is the whole Bible; for the Spirit of Christ spoke by the prophets and the apostles.⁵ Discipleship of Christ means faithful adherence to the Bible and to nothing but the Bible, no teaching of man's word, or traditions. Christ's Church is a Bible Church.

The Lutheran Church is a church of true discipleship. It continues in Christ's Word in doctrine and practice. It maintains as its basic formal principle Scripture alone. It stands four-square on the Holy Bible. Whatever the Bible teaches the Lutheran Church teaches; whatever the Bible rejects the Lutheran Church rejects. It acknowledges no spurious sources of faith, no traditions, no papal decrees, no opinions of reason, no hypotheses of science falsely so called, no speculations of enlightened reason, - nothing at all outside the Bible. *Luther's Small Catechism* proves this: The Law, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, etc. Rationalistic Protestantism and rationalistic Papism refuse to continue in Christ's Word. In the different denominations, there are children of God, but these believing Christians really do not belong to these erring churches. They hold membership in them only outwardly. However, the Lutheran Church continues in Christ's Word also in *practice*. Christ in His Word demands a definite practice in conformity to it. Faith and practice must go hand-in-hand. The Word professed must be applied to life. That is why we, in our church, cannot tolerate such things as sinful unionism, open communion, or any watering down of God's Word.

Such, then, is the true Lutheran Church, a church of true discipleship of Christ, adhering to Christ's Word with sincere loyalty. In this it follows the ancient Apostolic

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:23

⁵ 1 Peter 1:10-12

Church, the members of which who would rather suffer martyrdom than deny Christ.⁶ And it does seem at times that severe persecution is just around the corner! No, we must not be ashamed of our dear Lutheran Church. If we are ashamed of its doctrines and the firm stand it takes in matters of doctrine and practice, then we are ashamed of Christ. Rather, let us praise God that by grace He has made us members of this Church, and let us do all we can to uphold its dignity and truth, which the world needs so much today. Pharisees and Sadducees still oppose Christ; we must be loyal to Him.

The true Lutheran Church professes as its basic formal principle that every article of faith must be based upon an explicit word of God, and as its basic material principle it professes that we are saved by grace alone.

Let us now study its clear understanding and profession of the truth of salvation.

Agnosticism claims that the truth cannot be known. With Pilate, it says: “*What is truth?*” (John 18:38). Christ says: “**and you will know the truth.**” What did Jesus mean by “**the truth**”?

Jesus is not speaking of that truth which lies within the domain of earthly things. That truth we know by reason, although on account of original sin, which has corrupted also our intellectual powers, this truth is not readily perceived. People have a natural knowledge of God written in their hearts,⁷ however, man does not by nature know, and cannot know, spiritual truth, the truth regarding salvation. The Apostle Paul says that “*an unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually,*” (1 Cor. 2:14). With respect to this truth all men by nature walk in darkness and therefore do not possess the light of life. How different it is when men believe in Christ and continue in His Word! Then they know the truth, know it sufficiently, know it to their salvation. How well St. Peter knew this truth!⁸ How well St. Paul knew it!⁹ Just so all believers should know the truth of salvation. All who do not know the truth are not Christians. The true Christian says with St Paul, “*I know Whom I have believed,*” (2 Tim. 1:12). Every true believer knows and professes the same truth. This teaching, that we are saved by grace alone, includes the whole truth of salvation. It is the basic material principle of the Lutheran Church. How clearly and convincingly it

⁶ Matthew 10:31-32

⁷ Romans 1:19

⁸ Acts 2; 1 Peter 1:1-9

⁹ Romans 3:20-28

knows and professes this divine truth! In this truth centre the second and third articles of our Christian faith. Luther has written explanations of these articles, and how precious they are! I urge you to get out your Catechisms and refresh these explanations in your minds! See how in these articles Luther professes the doctrines of Christ's person and work and of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. There he shows how the truth of salvation is set forth in the chief parts of the Sacraments and the Office of the Keys and Confession; also, how the Lutheran Church teaches the divine Law in all its severity in order that the Gospel may be preached in all its sweetness. The Lutheran Church knows the truth regarding salvation and professes it unafraid of any foes of the Gospel. Should we not praise God for having led us most graciously into a Church which knows the truth? Salvation is our uppermost concern. Let us value the truth of salvation, by grace alone, with all that it implies.

Of those who continue in His Word, Jesus also says: **“the truth will make you free.”** What did He mean by this?

Only in Jesus and His teaching will anyone be free from sin, death, and Satan's rule, and thus free to serve God with a pure heart. In contrast, Judaism taught that study of God's Law made a person free.

Listen to the words of Isaiah 61:1-3, ¹ *“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on Me because the LORD has anointed Me to tell good news to poor people. He has sent Me to bandage up broken-hearted people, to announce freedom to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, ² to announce the year of the favour of the LORD, and the day of the vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, ³ to provide for those who grieve in Zion, to give them a splendid head-dress instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called ‘The Oaks of Righteousness, which the LORD has planted, so that He may get glory for Himself.’”* Many years later Jesus referred to this Scripture from Isaiah when He went up to the synagogue on the Sabbath day to worship. Standing in the synagogue, He read these words from Isaiah then said, *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,”* (Luke 4:21). Preaching good tidings to the meek, He proclaims *“freedom to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”* Jesus here does not mean political or social or economic freedom, but freedom from our spiritual foes, freedom from the guilt of sin (Col 1:14); freedom from hell (Col 1:13); freedom from the accusations of conscience (Col 1:20); freedom from the dominion of wickedness (Col 1:21); freedom from the erroneous opinions of men (Col 2:8); freedom from ceremonies and external forms (Col 2:14); freedom from Satan (Col 2:15); freedom from man-made rules (Col 2:16);

freedom from man-conceived worship (Col 2:18, 20, 21-23); freedom from the love of this world (Col 3:1-3); freedom from the demand of the Law that we must fulfil it before we may enter life eternal (Rom 3:28). What glorious freedom! Justification frees us from the guilt of sin; and “*where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation,*” (Luther’s Small Catechism). Sanctification frees us more and more from corruption. We Christians are free from the yoke of the Ceremonial Law and the grievous burdens of human traditions. We are free from spiritual bondage; we serve God, freely, and willingly.¹⁰ We are free to use the privileges of the sons of God; free citizens of the free Jerusalem, which, as the Apostle Paul says, “*is above,*” (Gal. 4:26). We are free from all prejudices, mistakes, and false notions of men that enslave and entangle the soul; free from the dominion of lust and passion (2 Cor. 3:17); free to behold the glory of the Lord and to be changed into the same image of glory (2 Cor. 3:18). Enemies of Christianity boast of their free thinking and their free thought; but they are in the worst kind of servitude, the servitude of their reprobate minds, of their Satan-controlled hearts. Free thinking is Christian thinking, Gospel thinking. The only free thought there is, is found in those whom the Gospel has made free. All thoughts that are brought into obedience to Christ are free and glorious.

Dear friends, how wonderful is the freedom of our own dear Lutheran Church! How beautifully it proclaims the freedom of souls through the Gospel! How gloriously free it is from the traditions of men and the bondage of ceremonial laws! The Gospel is the proclamation of spiritual emancipation; and, how clearly, how forcefully, the Lutheran Church proclaims this Gospel with all its manifold freedom! Gospel freedom made the Reformation; it is still the dynamic of our Lutheran Church. Compare the Lutheran Church with the papistic and Reformed churches where slavery still exists! Our Lutheran Church is the true company of God’s kings and priests.

Continue in Christ’s Word. Only then are you **truly (His) disciples**. Only then can you **know the truth**. Only then shall you be free from all spiritual bondage, children of God, and heirs of eternal salvation. May God grant this to us all! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Heavenly Father, we rejoice to remember Your constant love, and we join Your Church everywhere to praise Your glorious name. We thank You that Your Spirit has

¹⁰ Psalm 110:3

made us Your adopted children in Jesus Christ, so that we may truly know You as our Father, call on You confidently in prayer, and know that You will hear us.

We pray for all believers in the family of the Church. Preserve Your remnant of grace. Give Your flock shepherds whom Your Spirit teaches and leads, and who earnestly proclaim Your pure Word of life. Grant that they may lovingly feed Your sheep with Your Word, and strive to protect them from all error. Rescue Your Church from the dangerous lies of all false shepherds, so that Your children may be linked together in love, may stand firm in a common purpose and may work together to spread the Gospel. Bless the work of our Vicar Jake Zabel among us.

Show Your glory and power to the nations, O God. Turn those in authority whose eyes are spiritually blind to Your light, and from the power of Satan to Christ, so that they may possess the forgiveness of sins and a place among the children of God. Look with favour on our country, that liberty, justice, and high morals may hold sway, and destroy all ungodliness and evil influences.

Heavenly Father, let Your Spirit fill our homes. Let the word of Christ in all its richness live in the hearts of children, and enable all parents to be proper examples of Christian faith and life. Protect our families in every storm of life, and keep them from all evil.

Since You have sent Your Son into the world so that no one may die in His sins, keep us pure in a corrupt and sinful world, so that we may finally obtain the crown of life. Teach us to know better what You want for us, let us yield a rich harvest of godly deeds, make us able to stand firm in the faith. Help us to put to death the desires of our sinful nature, and to live in the Spirit, as those who will one day enjoy all that You have promised.

Heavenly Father, the source of all holy desires, wise plans, and right actions, give Your peace to all, especially to those who are facing pain, sickness, mental agony, spiritual distress, or any other burden of body or soul. Assure them of Your love and mercy, that they may place themselves in Your care, and receive from You everything they need for their lasting good.

Loving Father, You have invited us to bring our requests before You with thanks. Therefore accept these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 55:1-5

¹ "Come! Everyone who is thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, buy, and eat! Come! Buy wine and milk

without money and without cost! ² Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your labour for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me! Eat what is good, and enjoy rich food! ³ Turn your ears toward Me and come to Me! Listen, so that

your souls may stay alive! I shall establish an eternal Covenant with you, the enduring mercies shown to David. ⁴ Look! I have given Him as a Witness to the nations, a Leader, and a Commander of the nations.” ⁵ Look! You will summon a nation that you do not know, and a nation that has not known you will run to you, because of the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel. For He has honoured you.

Romans 9:1-13

¹ I am telling the truth in Christ. I am not lying, as my conscience bears witness to me by the Holy Spirit, ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those who are my own flesh and blood. ⁴ They are Israelites. To them belong the adoption as sons, the glory, the Covenants, the receiving of the Law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the fathers, and from them, according to His human nature, the Christ came, who is God over everything, blessed for ever! Amen.

⁶ This does not mean that the Word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel, ⁷ and not all who are the offspring of Abraham are for that reason his children. Rather, “Isaac’s children will be called your offspring.” ⁸ This means that the children of God are not those who are children by natural birth. Rather, the children of the promise are reckoned as Abraham’s offspring. ⁹ For this is how the promise was worded: “I shall come at this appointed time, and Sarah will have a son.” ¹⁰ Not only this,

but, Rebecca also conceived by one man, our father Isaac ¹¹ For the children had not yet been born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to election might remain, ¹² which does not depend on works, but on Him who calls; and yet she was told: “The elder one will serve the younger one.” ¹³ It is as Scripture has said, “I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.”

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place to be alone. The crowds heard about it and followed Him on foot from the cities. ¹⁴ When Jesus came out of the boat, He saw a large crowd. His heart was filled with pity for them and He healed their sick. ¹⁵ In the evening His disciples came to Him and said, “This is a deserted place and it is already late. Send the crowds away, that they may go into the villages to buy some food for themselves!” ¹⁶ Jesus answered them, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat!”

¹⁷ They told Him, “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish.”

¹⁸ He said, “Bring them here to Me!”

¹⁹ He ordered the people to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, said a blessing, and broke the loaves. He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ All of them had enough to eat. They took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ The number of men who had eaten was about

five thousand, not counting the women and children.