

Sermon – St. Paul’s Lutheran Church – New Ulm, MN – November 2017 - 3 John 1–8

After all of the anticipation was it everything you had hoped it would be? The 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation is now past. Did your celebration of that great event in history meet your expectations? Perhaps you attended the new “Luther movie.” You may have joined your brothers and sisters in Christ at one of the many special Reformation Festivals—like the one held up the hill at MLC’s Chapel of the Christ. Did you sing “A Mighty Fortress” with renewed gusto? Even if it was for the 6th or 7th time in a month? With all of the attention given to Martin Luther and his efforts at reforming the church perhaps you found yourself wanting to reconnect with Lutheran history and heritage.

Now let me ask you a more serious question. Have you been changed by the marking of such a monumental anniversary? Is your life different today as a result of observing “Reformation 500,” or did it come and go leaving you unchanged? I suppose that can be one of the challenges connected to such anniversaries. At a celebration like “Reformation 500” we recall what happened in history. And we give thanks to God for the blessings that we enjoy because of the event. But then life returns to normal and we go on living the way we did before the anniversary. (*Come to think of it. My wife might say, “Hey, that sounds like the way you approach our wedding anniversary every year! Just kidding!”*)

In ways that went beyond what Lutheran Christians do every October 31st, this year we recalled the fact that the Reformation was all about a person being saved by grace alone, through faith alone, as revealed in Scripture alone. We rejoiced that Martin Luther’s radical teaching that Christians are to live their faith each day in whatever vocation God has given them actually caught on. We recognized that those things have been our heritage for 500 years! We also rejoiced that in WELS we by God’s grace still have God’s Word in “its truth and purity.”

Now brothers and sisters in Christ, it is my prayer that each of us renews our commitment to live what we have just celebrated. Focusing on just one of the many blessings that are ours through the Lutheran Reformation let’s ask God to work in us an increased ability to show what faithfulness to the truth of God’s Word means in our lives.

To that end, we ask God the Holy Spirit to touch our hearts through a section of Scripture that we will share during our sermon together. In his Third Letter the disciple whom Jesus loved describes what it means for a Christian to live out his or her love for God’s truth. Listen as I read verses 1-8 of 3 John. (*Read text.*) We see that a follower of Christ can show his or her faithfulness to the truth of God’s Word in two specific ways. Let’s receive John’s encouragement as he says to us:

“SHOW YOUR FAITHFULNESS TO THE TRUTH”

- I. Walk in the truth each day of your life
- II. Work together with others for the truth

Since letter writing 2000 years ago was a little different from today we may wonder why the author of the letter is identified first and then the person who was receiving it. Letters at that time were typically written on a scroll. So it didn’t make sense to put your name at the bottom like we do. Then the person who received the letter would have had to unroll the whole thing to see who wrote it. That’s why John began his letter, “*The elder, To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.*” How do we know John is “*the elder*” into whom the Holy Spirit breathed these words? We accept the reliable testimony of the early church that included this letter among John’s Letters. And who was Gaius? Since Gaius was a very common name in the Roman culture we can’t say for sure. We know of at least three other men named Gaius mentioned in the New Testament. They were all associated in some way with the Apostle Paul. And there

doesn't seem to be a strong case that any one of those three "Gaiuses" is the man addressed by John wrote this short letter.

From this letter we call "3 John" we learn that one particular Gaius was a faithful lay leader in his congregation. This Gaius addressed by John had been offering his home as a place for traveling pastors and teachers to stay. But the most important fact to point out in these verses is that John says Gaius is someone whom he loves "*in the truth.*" With those words John was reminding Gaius of the bond that formed their relationship. They both loved the truth of God's Word and were committed to walking in that truth and working together for that truth.

I.

After a heartfelt prayer for Gaius John then went on to identify a key behavior in a Christian's life. It is showing faithfulness to the truth by walking in the truth in everyday life. "³ *It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth.* ⁴ *I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*" Twice John stated just how Gaius showed his faithfulness to the truth. He walked in the truth each day of his life.

Since there are many people in the world today saying what Pontius Pilate said to Jesus, "What is truth?" it would be good for us to remind ourselves of the answer to that question. What is truth? Or as some have asked, "Is there any truth? Can each person decide what truth is for himself or herself?" The one answer to all such questions is that Jesus is the truth! Not only is he the truth but we also remember that he declared, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" (John 14:6) Also recall that in John's Gospel Jesus said, "*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.* ³² *Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" So just as he is the truth so too Jesus taught the truth. And recall what Jesus said about God's Word. In John 17:17 he asked his Father on behalf of his disciples, "*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*" So to be clear, we can say that faithfulness to the truth means being faithful to what Jesus taught along with all of God's Word.

Now what exactly did it mean that Gaius was walking in the truth? First of all, that meant that Gaius knew the truth. He studied the Scriptures and in turn he found ways to apply them to his life. He listened to the "brothers" (those faithful teachers and preachers) that came to him with the truth. Then Gaius took the lessons and sermons to heart and applied them to his life. Then in turn, the way he lived his daily life reflected his faithfulness to the truth. We could say that Gaius wasn't just a "good person" who got along with his neighbors and obeyed the laws of the Roman Empire. Nor was he a superficial follower of Jesus. Gaius walked in the truth. That meant that his decisions about what he thought, and said, and did were guided by the truth of God's Word. The life he lived went beyond a bland love for others or social responsibility. He loved others because Christ loved him. Gaius showed his faithfulness to the truth by walking in the truth in his daily life.

If we look honestly at our lives we will quickly see that we often just "talk the talk" but don't actually "walk in the truth." Even with the blessing of the Word of God in its truth and purity we live as though it should applied to everyone else but us. We know the Commandments and perhaps even Luther's explanations of them as we learned them in Catechism class. But we fail to actually apply the truth of God's Word in our lives. We regularly welcome other gods into our lives and fail to love God above all things. We may not curse like a sailor but we whisper the same things under our breath. We sing, "God's Word is Our Great Heritage" but then we fail to regularly hear and learn that Word. We make excuses for skipping church and for studying God's Word. We complain about those whom God has placed in authority over us.

Actual murder may not enter our minds but hatred for others at times fills our minds. We condemn those who outwardly disobey the Six Commandment but we let lust fill our thoughts. Or we dishonor our spouse or marriage itself with our words and actions. We say that the truth of God's Word is our highest priority in life but we seek wealth ahead of it. Contentment regarding what God gives us is far from us. We secretly covet things and other people. Over and over again we fail to walk in the truth.

So how can we live the type of Christian life that Gaius lived? First of all, like John and Gaius we let God's law crush our sinful pride. Like them we confess our sins to God and find mercy in Christ alone. Then through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament we find spiritual renewal. Like Gaius we learn and relearn the truth so we can walk in it. As we age, and as the world in which we live changes, we continually look at how we can apply the truth of God's Word to each situation. Our decisions as a spouse, or parent, or employer, or employee are then made as we walk in the truth of Scripture. What we do at work, how we act on vacation, what we say to others, are just extensions of our walking in the truth. We apply God's Word to all the situations of every day life. That is walking in the truth as John declared to Gaius. That is how we show our faithfulness to the truth.

The standard railroad gauge (that's the distance between the rails) in the United States is 4 feet, 8.5 inches. That seems like an odd measurement, doesn't it? So why was that particular measurement used? Although it's not an unbroken historical link some have traced that measurement back two thousand years. They have noted how that measurement was used by the Roman Empire for their chariots. The first roads in Europe were used for centuries after the Roman Empire disappeared. But the ruts the Roman chariots made were left behind. So for many generations those who used the roads made the axles on their wagons the same width. The wagons then lead to railroads. If that connection from history is true then the width of our railroad tracks may be the greatest example of being "stuck in a rut" that has ever occurred.

When it comes to his Word, God wants us to be "stuck in a rut" and to continue in it as we pass it along from age to age. Unlike the distance between the rails on U.S. railroads, in order for the truth of God's Word to be passed from generation to generation over the past 500 years it had to be shared, and taught, and studied. Then that Word had to be applied to the lives of individual Christians so that they could walk in the truth. Friends in Christ may we continue that tradition as we show our faithfulness to the truth by walking in the truth.

II.

In addition to walking in the truth Christians show their faithfulness to the truth in another way. Listen again to what John wrote as he continued his letter to Gaius, "⁵ *Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you.* ⁶ *They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God.* ⁷ *It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans.* ⁸ *We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.*" Before there were colleges like MLC and seminaries, the Apostles trained the next generation of pastors and teachers. Think of the Apostle Paul's Missionary journeys recorded in the Book of Acts. As he established churches he also trained workers in those churches. And before there were what we would call "congregational mission offerings" or sources of funding for pastors and teachers they relied on the hospitality of the people who received their messages for their food and lodging. Gaius had been deeply involved in this kind arrangement. He had been showing such hospitality to the "brothers" even though they were strangers to him. John encouraged Gaius to continue that practice.

Obviously the times and circumstances have changed. But we still have this same opportunity for showing our faithfulness to the truth. We do that by working together with others for the truth. Here at St. Paul's we work with our pastors and other called workers for the truth as we support them and provide for them. At our congregation we work together for the truth in other ways. Some of you serve as a church officer or on a board or committee. Others of you may serve in informal ways. Personally, my favorite volunteers are those who serve the coffee and donuts on Sunday! Others volunteer here and there for a variety of tasks.

And then our working together for the truth extends beyond St. Paul's Lutheran Church. We support the wider work of the church through our connection to the WELS. Here at our congregation we bring our regular, proportionate, and joyful offerings. Our congregation in turn sends a portion of those offerings to the synod. Through those dollars we support world missions, home missions, and worker training. Additionally, we pray for that work and encourage those who serve on our behalf as we have opportunity.

When it comes to supporting called workers we at St. Paul's are doubly blessed. Again, we support and care for our called workers. Think of what Jesus said in Matthew 10, "*Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.*" And then there is an additional opportunity for us to show our faithfulness to the truth by supporting those who are preparing for Gospel ministry. Every Sunday of the school year dozens and dozens of future called workers sit among us. We may get to know some of them. But many of them may remain strangers in a sense. Again John's words ring in our ears, "*We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.*" Yes, brothers and sisters, since 1884 when the college up on the hill was founded St. Paul's has been working "*together for the truth*" with young Christians preparing for ministry. May God bless us as we continue to do that! May God encourage us to show our faithfulness to the truth by working together for the truth with others.

For that reason I am boldly asking for your support of our ministry at Martin Luther College. Before you leave here today stop at the "MLC table" and take one of these "cards" as reminder to pray for more pastors and teachers. And to pray for your college of ministry. Be specific in your prayers. Look around our congregation and pray for the young people here to consider serving in public ministry. Also, before you leave here today take one of these "booklets" with you. It tells the story of MLC—our mission and ministry—and in the last couple of pages you will find information about a variety of ways that you can support your college of ministry so that more and more we can walk in the truth.

The long anticipated "500th Anniversary" of the Reformation is now history. Was your celebration of Reformation 500 everything you had hoped it would be? I guess at this point it "was what it was." There is no chance to celebrate it again. Even with people living longer none of us will be around for "Reformation 1000" if God allows the world to continue for 500 more years. And ultimately we can say there will never be another Reformation 500. You know, perhaps that it wasn't all that important after all. Yes, it was great to review what the Reformation means to us. Grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone! Those are always good facts to remember in connection with our Reformation heritage. Giving thanks for the fact that "God's Word is our great heritage" is also important to recall. But now let's show our faithfulness to the truth! As John encouraged Gaius long ago he also encourages us. Today he says, "Show your faithfulness to the truth. As you walk in the truth in your daily lives. As you work together for the truth with others." Amen.