

A couple of weeks ago I watched a documentary about LuLaRoe, the multi-level marketing company that, for a few extraordinarily successful years, sold billions of dollars worth of leggings and other women's clothing, mostly over Facebook. Since pyramid schemes work by turning salespeople into middle managers of the employees they recruit, the company held lavish conventions to reward their high achievers and motivate them to sell and recruit more. But while they were busy staging glorified pep rallies, their salesforce was expanding beyond the size of the market, their production was outpacing distribution, and their quality was declining precipitously. They started out promising a path to financial security and independence while working from home, but they ended up bankrupting a lot of people by compromising quality and failing to honor their own policies. Former employees describe the experience like being in a cult.

This made me think of the Lutheran Church and why we are careful to observe, rather than celebrate, the Reformation. We don't want to read John's gospel and think that, as descendants of the Reformation, we have inherited the truth and our theology has set us free. On this 504th anniversary of Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, we would do well not to throw ourselves a pep rally without looking critically and honestly at the ways in which we have failed to live up to the Church's reforming spirit, and how we have done harm rather than good, both historically and in the present. We could start with being honest about Luther himself, who on the one hand wrote to save the Church from spiritual harm, but on the other hand spewed hateful, anti-Semitic rhetoric that would eventually contribute to the Holocaust.

Let's not make Luther's same mistake when we read the gospel today: John's Jewish community was struggling through the conflict between those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and those who didn't. But Jesus, the 12 disciples, the earliest members of the Christian church, and the group of believers whom Jesus addresses in today's gospel were all Jewish: the antagonism we sometimes read in the gospel is not between Jesus and the Jewish people, nation, race, or religion. Jesus usually finds himself at odds only with the self-proclaimed religious experts who—just like Christian religious experts—sometimes can't see the forest for the trees.

Jesus is talking to those who "believed in him" which means those who have been following and learning from him—not just the 12 but the larger following of disciples. When we hear the word "believe" we tend to think of intellectually agreeing with an idea, but that's a modern, post-Enlightenment use of the word *believe* that is foreign to John and Jesus. *Believing in Jesus* in John's gospel always refers to living in relationship with him, listening to his teaching, endeavoring to practice what he has been preaching, acting as though emulating Jesus is, in fact, doing exactly what God has commanded. Jesus, who just finished speaking about his imminent death, assures the

people *if you continue in my word, you will be disciplining yourselves to be like me; you will therefore experience that I am the truth, and the truth will set you free.* He's not so much challenging them to do something new as he is encouraging them to keep doing what they have been doing and not to lose heart when he is killed. When he is crucified, it will look as though they had been following the wrong guy, that Jesus had been mistaken all along or had misled them on purpose; Jesus wants them to know that they have been in relationship with God's Son, and they should continue in that relationship, even though it will look like he has lost and the world has won.

But like Nicodemus who confused Jesus' words about being born again with biological birth, and like the Samaritan woman at the well who confused Jesus' words about living water with regular drinking water, these believers confuse Jesus' promise of freedom with political emancipation. And they are just about as offended as your average American would be if someone implied that we weren't free. *We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean, we will be made free?* Now, it's worth noting that the Israelites *had been* slaves to just about everyone: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and as this conversation is happening, Rome. But that's not really Jesus' point. He tells them, if you sin, you're a slave to sin, and you need the Son, the heir of the household, to make you free.

These believers seem to have forgotten that after God saved them from slavery in Egypt and set their GPS for the land promised to their ancestor Abraham, God also gave them the Law and told them to obey it. The prophets narrated how the people fell far short of the godly life outlined in the commandments. But Jesus was living that godly life perfectly, these believers were *watching* Jesus live that godly life perfectly, and by following Jesus, *they* were learning, though imperfectly, to live that godly life, too. It's as if they had already figured out that they needed Jesus, but they had forgotten why.

Today is a great day for us to remember that we, too, need the truth that Jesus taught and lived and calls us to live with him. It's not the Reformation that makes us free. It's not the bible, even the practice of reading the bible for ourselves, that makes us free. It's not Lutheran theology that makes us free. It's not correct belief about any number of religious topics that makes us free. Only the Son who is the way, the truth, and the life makes us free. Of course, that's only good news when we're not indignantly claiming that we've never been enslaved to anyone or anything. May Reformation Day *not* find us congratulating ourselves for figuring it all out and getting it right on our own; may the legacy of the Reformation be ongoing self-reflection so that we can see the truth—how much we need the One who never stops transforming us more fully into the people God calls us to be. When we see that it is not we ourselves but the Son who sets us free, then we will be free indeed.