

We have just heard God's word read in Indonesian and Urdu. These are only two of over 6,900 languages worldwide. Through the prophet Jeremiah God said, "The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with you." Surely, God's new covenant is written on our hearts. Then through John's Gospel, Jesus said to his disciples, "If you continue in my word... you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free!" The truth is Christ Jesus is the new covenant. The truth is the grace freely offered through Christ.

As we begin to explore these two scriptures in light of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation and the 130th Anniversary of the Birth of this Church, here are the English translations of the scriptures read: Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 8:31-36, respectively:

^{31:31}The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

^{8:31}Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?" ³⁴Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Free indeed! "If you continue in my word; if you stick with this, living out what I tell you," said Jesus, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Jesus was preparing his disciples for what was to come, for Jesus would soon turn towards Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus steeped in the Hebrew scriptures knew Jeremiah's words. Jesus knew the word of God to be trustworthy and true, for although "people are like grass," said the prophet Isaiah, "The word of the Lord will stand forever."

Martin Luther affirmed this truth and took seriously Jesus' charge from the Gospel of John. Luther continued in Christ's word, searching, studying, living out what Christ taught in the Gospels. Listen to Luther's reply to the church hierarchy in response to the Ninety-Five Theses he nailed to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517: "**I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.** I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand; may God help me. Amen."

The church of Martin Luther's day had grown politically powerful and materially rich. The church began to collect more and more taxes to feed its life of abundance and prestige. The corrupt practices degenerated to such a degree that in order to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the highest leader of the church established a system of marketing and selling divine pardons known as indulgences. The system provided the opportunity to acquire, for a sum of

money, a document certifying you as a pardoned person and free from certain punishments after death, as if they had power to control eternal destinies!

In the midst of this corruption, there were believers who raised alarm. One of them was the young monk named Martin Luther. Luther had struggled with the guilt of sin from a young age. Although he understood God's forgiveness, he had not grasped the totality of Christ's actions. Until, one day when he was immersed in Romans, Luther heard clearly for the first time the freedom that Christ offers – "If you continue in my word... you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

Luther was set free from sin by grace alone or as the solas of the reformation are known – Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. The convergence of technology – the Gutenberg printing press – coupled with Luther's convictions of the freedom that Christ offered, ignited what we know as the Reformation. After his passionate response to church leadership, friends feared for his life and they kidnapped and hid Luther in a castle in Wartburg, Germany. In ten short remarkable weeks, Luther translated the Greek New Testament into vernacular German, which was published September 21, 1522.

For sixteen centuries, the Word of God, the Bible, was available only to scholars who could read Hebrew, Greek or Latin. But, Luther's German translation brought scripture to the people and inspired other translators. William Tyndale visited Luther in 1525 and then translated the Scriptures into English. Out of the more than 700 local languages of Indonesia, more than 100 languages have portions or the whole bible translated. Javanese and Batak, have multiple Bible versions! The first Hindi language translation was by a German Missionary in the early 1700's. The first Urdu translation was in 1843. Friends, we should not take our respective Bible translations for granted. We have access to the word of God. A gift has been given to us, inspired by Luther, and the word of God has been placed back in the peoples' hands. Don't leave the Bible to leaders, such as myself, read the Bible for yourself, for God's word is living and transformative!

Martin Luther challenged the teachings and practices of the church of his time, giving way during that century to reforms in Christianity that eventually encompassed all of Europe. Jose Capella-Pratts reminds us of the major teachings rescued from the corrupt hierarchy of the church:

- That all believers are to have direct access to the Bible
- That salvation cannot be bought or earned; it is something that God gives – a gift
- That all believers have direct access to God; an intermediary is not necessary
- That the Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice for believers

Yet, the Reformation that we celebrate today is not merely history. The Reformation was and is a dynamic process that continues to this day – reformed, always reforming. Our continuing reform has allowed us to see how the church has been historically complicit in slavery, racism and sexism. Our continuing reform has made it possible for women to be ordained as deacons, ruling elders and teaching elders within our church.

Yes, "*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* is our motto as Presbyterians, yet we must not forget the phrase "*secundum verbi dei*," which translates "according to the Word of God." We are reformed. Yet, we must never forget that we are always reforming according to the Word of God. We are not the agents of reformation. We are the object of reformation by God and the call of the Spirit!

Our reformed motto as Presbyterians does not bless either preservation for preservation's sake or change for change's sake. We are to continually listen to the Spirit at work among us, as we did when the church's membership expanded to include the diversity we enjoy today. Anna Case-Winters writes, "This motto calls us to something more radical than we have imagined. It challenges our impulses, habits and agendas. It brings a prophetic critique to our cultural accommodations, and calls us to repentance." Our faith is not static. Our faith is to be dynamic!

The dynamic faith of Synod Missionary Rev. James McDonald birthed this church, initially named The Presbyterian Church of East San Bernardino Valley in 1887. The church was incorporated by the Presbytery of Los Angeles in October of 1887 and within the year its name was changed to the First Presbyterian Church of Redlands.

Now imagine with me 1887, when this church was birthed. Grover Cleveland was President of the United States and Washington Bartlett was governor of California. The first orange groves in Redlands were planted just five years earlier by Mr. E. J. Waite of Wisconsin. This reformation of land use in Redlands, became a big part of our city's history. For almost 75 years, this city was the center of the largest naval orange producing region in the world! If you were wondering about how you got to church in those early days, you probably walked or took a horse and buggy, for Ford's Model A was still 6 years from production and the mass-produced Model-T was eleven years into the future. There were no cars, let alone airplanes! And if a phone was in the home, it was most certainly a party line for years to come.

Now imagine the 50th anniversary of this church's history in 1937! Germany was rising to power, although what was known as the Second World War had not yet started. Now imagine the 100th anniversary in 1987, which happened three years after the brick-sized cell phone was introduced and pagers were the standard. And now, leap with me to today, our 130th anniversary, where instantaneous communication around the globe is possible because so many of us carry smart phones and have access to the internet at our finger tips.

Although 1887 and 2017 are lightyears apart in technology and in so many other ways, our faith is fueled by the same word of God. The word of God has stood the test of time. The word though is living, not dead. The Living Word is Spirit breathed as the faithful engage the text. Our understanding of the Scriptures is continually being reforming, yet Christ, the Living Word, is the same word which transformed Luther and still powerfully transforms lives today.

Now I want to be historically accurate and share that the Reformation led to inquisitions, burnings at the stake and much blood shed, as people claimed to have the whole truth over and against others of Christian faith. The passion of Luther, "**My conscience is captive to the Word of God.** I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience," has led to our most recent denominational fracture over the issue of ordination. "Sola Scripture" has provided the fuel that has led to the splintering of the Church with a capital "C" again and again, as Christians fight over the authority of Scripture and one correct interpretation.

Yet, Jesus said to his disciples, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." Just as Apostle Paul reminded the church at Corinth, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." Or as the South African anti-apartheid hymn in our new hymnal proclaims, "Freedom is coming, Freedom is coming, Freedom is coming, oh yes, I know! Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming, oh yes, I know!"

One hundred and thirty years into our history, we are reminded that we have been set free by Christ. We are not bound to what was, we are free to imagine what can be. I don't know what the next five years, or twenty-five years, or even a hundred years, will look like; but I do know that the word of God will stand, for Christ the Living Word is the new covenant written upon our hearts and this new covenant sets us free.

Pastor Max Morrison said in 1970 as this sanctuary was dedicated, "May we, First Presbyterian Church, become a moving power in the life of the City of Redlands." This will only be possible, if we live into the freedom Christ offers. This will only be possible if we are willing to be transformed, reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. May we be so willing! Amen.