

Meredith always knew that she was adopted — and she has always been proud of her story. When introducing herself to her first-grade class, she confidently stood up and said, “My name is Meredith, and I’m adopted.”

In her family, adoption was always an open conversation. She remembers reading children’s books with adoption storylines and always having confidence in her adoption story. She was only 8 years old when she decided she wanted to find her birth parents — and promptly let her dad know.

Her dad said, ‘Well, let’s wait until you’re 16, because you’re a little young.’ Meredith filed it away.¹

Meredith wanted to know the truth about her origins,
about her birth mother and father.

At some level, she felt that knowing that truth would free her from that uncertainty and the aching absence of not knowing who brought her into the world. She was seeking the truth of her identity.

I think we’ve all been there, wanting to know, wanting to understand the truth about something. . .

We are celebrating truth-seeking today on this Reformation Sunday. If you are keeping track, it could be considered our denomination's 507th birthday since 507 years ago, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church on October 31st, asking for other priests and academics to come to hear the defense of his propositions.

Luther’s critique was in the service of finding a greater truth, which for him was the church being more faithful to the biblical text, and the biblical text alone, not the church’s centuries of tradition.

A bit more on Luther’s criticism:

Chief among Luther’s critiques was the church’s practice of selling indulgences, a small piece of paper, a voucher really, that was purchased to

¹[How This Adoptee Found Her Birth Parents — and a New System of Support](#)

reduce the time of punishment in purgatory. The money generated by the sale of indulgences built many of the great cathedrals in Europe, particularly St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The sale of indulgences was disproportionately to the poor, who, because they were poor, could scarcely afford to buy indulgences. Luther, seeing this abuse of power, wanted to discuss it with his colleagues.

Luther, in 1517, was a reformer, not someone trying to found a new version of Christianity. He was someone who was trying to make the Church be better,
be more faithful,
faithful to scripture first and foremost.

One of the hallmarks of the Reformation is the notion that the church is "reformed and always reforming." Three words in Latin: *Refomata et Reformanda*. Luther and other reformers did not think that their reforms were the final reforms needed for all time. They held a healthy doctrine of "sin" which led them to believe that, since the world, the church, and our very selves were broken, that we are self-centered, and "sinful" to use the old word, we would always need God's help to reform and realign with God's purposes.

For Luther, the full phrasing was "*Reformed and always Reforming, according to the Word of God.*"

Reform, for Luther, was simply *to be more faithful to the teaching of scripture*. And we live out this tradition to this day. It's why I stand up here each Sunday and help us understand scripture. That's why Valerie leads our Bible Study. Luther, and we, want to know the truth of scripture, and live the truth of scripture.

"Knowing the truth" is the central subject of our gospel text this morning. No doubt this connection of "truth-knowing" is the reason that this same passage from John 8 is always the text on Reformation Sunday.

As we read, Jesus is having a conversation with some of his followers about knowing the truth. Specifically, the text says he's speaking with "the Jews who had believed him." It needs to be pointed out that John is unique in the gospels in his use of the term, "the Jews." John's oft-used terminology that seems to be an all-inclusive categorization of "the Jews" has been problematic in the history of the Christian church. Blanket assumptions of "the Jews" being a monolithic group from then until now are just not accurate. Commentator

Judith Jones summarizes well the fact that more recent scholarship sheds new light on this issue as she argues

“that the Greek word *Ioudaioi*, [e-yo-die-oye] which is often translated as ‘Jews,’ should be translated as ‘Judeans’ instead. The term does not refer to all Jewish people, but to the Judeans—the residents of Judea—with whom Jesus was in conversation. Furthermore, many of them were not the ordinary people of Judea, but the religious leaders. [Sadly,] translating the term as “Jews” has too often led Christians [throughout history] to use biblical texts as a pretext for persecuting Jews.”

Also, sadly, Luther himself wrote some horrifically antisemitic, anti-Jewish works. As a corrective, the ELCA has formally denounced these statements and apologized to our sisters and brothers in the Jewish community in the Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community adopted in 1994.

Back to our text. Jesus is speaking to Judean followers and gives one of the most well-known statements in scripture, “*you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*” It’s a phrase that shows up in some surprising places.

In the entrance of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Washington DC, chiseled into the wall, and laid in granite on the floor is the CIA’s motto. It is clearly visible for every visitor and employee to see as they come through the majestic foyer and the motto is this: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free,” and it even gives the reference of John 8:32. Some 20 colleges have a portion of this verse as their motto, “The truth will set you free.” There are more than a dozen books on Amazon titled “The Truth will set you free.” James Garfield famously said, “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable,” and Gloria Steinham has a book entitled *The Truth will set you free, but first it will [tick] you off*, although she uses another word for “tick.” I think she’s right by the way.

The interesting thing is that all these references have something in common. All these examples are only quoting verse 32, or part of verse 32. But verse 32, the “and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free,” is preceded by verse 31 (duh) which says this:

“*If you continue in my word, you are my disciples.*”
Then comes the statement

“and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

And that makes all the difference for the followers of Jesus, doesn't it? Truth isn't abstract; Truth is Jesus, and being set free happens when Jesus sets us free.

Returning to Luther. Listen to the words of the first of the 95 theses:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

How do we live a life of repentance? A life of turning around, seeing in new ways? Seeing in new ways of course involves seeking the truth, seeking to know the ways we have fallen short, and missed the mark of God's shalom, God's good intention for us and for the world.

How do we seek the truth, individually, as a church here at Arlington Hills, as the ELCA denomination? These are not easy questions, but the first answer is to do what Jesus tells us to do, *abide in his word, to abide in him*. That is the ultimate way that we will “know the truth,” and know how to repent.

And, as a matter of course, trusting in the word of God, the living Word, through the written Word, we will know the truth, and so we will be set free. Free from the burden of sin, the need to earn our salvation, and you will be freed to love unconditionally.

Not all adoption reunion stories have happy endings, but Meredith's does. When Meredith turned 16, her parents did help her search for her birth mother. Using the very little knowledge they had from her closed adoption, they were able to use the internet to eventually track down her birth mother. Looking at her birth mother's Facebook photo, for the first time in her life,

Meredith was seeing someone who looked like her. Eventually, she was able to meet her birth mother and today, she is like a “super-close aunt” according to Meredith. They talk almost every other day, and Meredith is thankful for the support her birth mother gives her. The search and reunion brought her more family and love than she ever thought possible.

She learned the truth, about her birth mom, and she was freed from her uncertainty, from the aching absence of not knowing her origins.

May we all know truth,
Most importantly,

the truth found in Jesus,
Because “if the Son makes you free,
you will be free indeed.” **Amen.**