

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I have been leading a theological book group online for about four years now. It was one of the good things that grew out of the COVID pandemic. The book we're reading now is by a British author who had some exposure to church as a child, but who subsequently became an atheist, and then twenty years later returned to the Christian faith. In his book he's trying to make a case for Christianity to skeptics like he was for those twenty years. But his case is not logical or argumentative, because he doesn't think you can argue someone into faith. Instead his appeal is to experience and to story. The Christian faith, he says, is a story that makes sense of our experience in the world. Or at least, he would be quick to concede, it is a story that has made sense of his own experience. But he also suspects that his experience is far from unique. I'm going to wait until I finish the book before I recommend it, but I can say now that I think he's on to something.

We tell a lot of stories to make sense of our lives. I have not always appreciated that. I think for a long time in my life I associated storytelling with primitive cultures. Ancient people told stories about a world they didn't understand very well because they didn't have the means we have today to understand all the complexities and nuances of the world around them. But we have science, and the ability to see things as they really are. So we don't need to tell stories anymore.

Ironically, that itself turns out to be a story; a thoroughly modern story. And science itself has revealed it to be so. It has challenged our modern conceit and shown us the limits of our ability to observe the world around us. We've learned that our eyes perceive only a narrow band of the electro-magnetic spectrum, so we see only a small part of the world as it really is. We've learned that our memories are selective and changeable, not at all like video or audio recordings. We've even learned that our responses to the world around us are dictated more by subconscious and autonomic reactions than conscious and deliberate choices.

But this turns out to be a story too. I just said that "we" have learned all those things, as though everyone accepts such lessons, or would if they were explained to them. But the reality is more complex. Not everyone accepts or understands the scientific method. Somewhere between 6 and 20 percent of Americans believe the moon landings were faked. One to two percent believe the earth is flat. They tell a different story that describes an alternate reality.

And now we live in an age of "alternative facts" in the political realm. Different information sources tell different stories to different audiences describing different realities. It doesn't take much effort to notice that our two dominant political factions are telling vastly different stories about our present reality and about what kind of a country we ought to be.

But it also doesn't take much thought to realize that not all stories are created equal, and not all claims about reality are true, or even close to true. The Reformation that we celebrate today was founded on the conviction that some stories are truer than others. Some stories are created to benefit some people at the expense of others. That's what had happened in the medieval church. Over time, the church's story morphed from the good news of God's unconditional reconciling love for sinful human beings and turned into a story of "pay to play:" "If you help God, God will help you." And of course, the molders of that story reaped the rewards. St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was built off of the proceeds of the "pay to play" story.

The Reformation recognized that as a false story about God, and tried to get the church back to its authentic story, the one it was founded on. It was a valiant effort that was only partly successful. But the Reformation isn't worth celebrating unless we are committed ourselves to

continuing the effort of reclaiming that authentic story in the face of all the competing stories that are out there.

This is what Jesus was getting at in our gospel reading today. Because what Jesus was doing in his earthly ministry was its own kind of Reformation: telling a truer and more authentic story about God than God's people were telling themselves. Jesus' story is about a God who loves the world so much that God will give anything to save it from itself, and from all the forces that try to destroy it. His story tells us that God's love, shown most fully on the cross, is the enduring power of the universe that conquers sin, death, and the power of evil. It is this story that Jesus is talking about when he tells his disciples to "continue in [his] word." His "word" is the authentic story about God's love for the world.

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples," says Jesus, "and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Notice what Jesus is not saying. He is not saying, "if you continue in my word you *will be* my disciples," or "I'll make you my disciples." He is not saying, "if you do your part, I'll do mine." He says, "You *ARE* my disciples. Be the disciples you already are!"

Here is an astonishing thing about the Christian faith that Martin Luther and his collaborators rediscovered and reemphasized. It's expressed more clearly in our second reading this morning. In spite of the fact that we are in captivity to sin, as we confessed a few minutes ago, that we are fallen and unrighteous creatures, God has declared us forgiven and freed from our sin for Jesus sake. But doesn't *this* sound like "alternative facts?" I can't tell you how many times I've heard the words of God's forgiveness declared to me, and yet I do not experience myself to be free from the grip of sin. I come back week after week with more sins to confess. And you do too.

Here's the difference, though, between our alternative facts and God's alternative facts. Our alternative facts are lies. And that doesn't change no matter how often we repeat them or how many people believe them. But when God speaks the alternative fact of light into the darkness, it happens. When God speaks earth and sky into existence from nothingness, they become reality. When Jesus speaks life into a death-scented tomb, life happens, impossibly, against all odds and expectations.

So here you are, continuing in Jesus' word, gathered as you do every week around the life-giving gospel delivered and embodied in word and sacrament. You are Jesus' disciples. You are the branches to his vine. You are that even on your bad days, even when you're not feeling it, because he said so. And because he said so, it's happening, believe it or not.

But do believe it. Trust Jesus' story of God's love over all the stories the world tells you about your worth and value, and about the worth and value of the people around you. Trust also Jesus' story of forgiveness. Trusting that we are forgiven means recognizing that sin has a grip on us. It's why we need to hear again and again those words of forgiveness. It's why we keep coming back here week after week. Because we do listen to those competing voices about who we are and what we are worth and why, and sometimes we believe them.

But God's word of love and forgiveness is pushing back, rewriting our stories and creating a new and better reality. And when by God's grace we begin to trust his promises in the face of all the false promises, when we continue in Jesus' story, then we know the one who is the truth, and the way and the life. And there is freedom in that truth – freedom from captivity to sin, freedom to live life joyfully and gratefully, freedom to love one another as God has loved us. And that, my friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is a story that is worth telling, and believing, and living. May it be the story of our lives. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the story of Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.