

One Little Word

John 8:31-36

*Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

This has undoubtedly been a difficult week for our community. As we gather for worship today, on this Reformation Sunday, what should be, by all rights, one of the great celebration days in the life of our Lutheran Church, I haven't really felt much like celebrating. My heart is heavy—as are many of yours—by the news of the death of 16 year old Riley Reich this week. There seem to be no words to adequately express our grief for a life cut far too short, for a beloved family of our community who are mourning, and for the many youth in our Harrisonburg community who feel lost without their friend. There are no words... And yet with a twist of irony, we gather around the familiar texts of this festival day that say, *"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."*

How do we walk in this freedom, when we find ourselves at a loss for words? I don't think this question is simply contained to this particular Sunday. Each week we gather for worship, and each week members of this community bear their burdens and joys to this place. Some days we can name deep community grief, other days we suffer in silence. Some days we can proclaim sources of community hope, other days we hold hope as a secret—a defiant seed of life deep within us. All of that happens here in the midst of Christ's beloved community.

As I reflected on this truth this week, a line kept sticking with me from our beloved Lutheran anthem, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. From verse three, *"Though hordes of devils fill the land all threat'ning to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot over pow'r us. This word's prince may rage, in fierce war engage. He is doomed to fail; God's judgment will prevail! **One little word subdues him!**"*

Like a mantra this week I've repeated again and again, *"one little word subdues him. One little word. One little word."* Today, the most Lutheran thing we can do is to turn back to God's word and God's sacraments, and listen for the little word God is speaking. When we find ourselves at a loss for words—whether seeking words to express the fullness of our joy, or depth of our sorrow—we are reminded through the work of the Holy Spirit, God is *still* speaking. God is speaking a little word of life... of hope... of love... of grace.

It was God's Little Word that spoke order into Chaos in the beginning. It was God's little word that became flesh and lived among us—teaching, healing, and ultimately dying to show us God's way of love and through his resurrection and offer salvation for all God's people. God spoke a *little word* again and again, and God's love was made known. As Lutheran Christians on this reformation day, we especially know this to be true.

When Martin Luther began his movement, it was rooted in the Word of God. Luther feared that the Church had strayed from God's word of Grace, instead offering to sell salvation for human coin through

the practice of indulgences. Luther wrote and spoke against this, and even in the face of a trial that would mark him an outlaw and a heretic, Luther stood resolutely in God's Word. This movement of Reformation was not an isolated event 502 years ago, but rather a movement of the Holy Spirit that turns us again and again to God's word as a means of understanding our sinfulness and witnessing to God's grace. Again, and again, we proclaim the power and goodness of a little Word, because God is still speaking. And it is our call to speak this little word of life, hope, love, and grace.

In fact, each of you who is a baptized Christian is a minister of the Word. Did you know that? We ordain leaders in this church to be Ministers of Word and Sacrament, and Ministers of Word and Service, as pastors and deacons respectively. And while each of these leaders acknowledges their unique calling to administering the sacraments or serving in Christ's church, leaders share their common identity with all baptized believers as Ministers of the Word.

You have been ordained, each of you, in the waters of Holy Baptism to follow this call to the ministry of proclaiming God's little word of love and hope, and at 11:00 today our confirmands will affirm that call in their lives.

How can it be that we each have this calling and ministry? Or as Luther asks and answers in his Small Catechism, "How can water do such great things?" And he says, "*Clearly the water does not do it, but the word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this word of God in the water. For without the word of God the water is plain water and not a baptism, but with the word of God it is a baptism, that is, a grace-filled water of life...*" The word present in the gift of water has called and ordained us to this shared ministry of the Word, as the Priesthood of all Believers.

Likewise, we are sustained for this ministry of the Word in which we share by the Lord's Supper. Mere bread and wine, imbued with this little Word of our Lord, become for us the true presence of Christ in this place, sustaining us for service in his name, forgiving us of sin, and uniting us with all the saints who share in this heavenly feast. We have been Washed in a little Word, we will be fed with a little Word, and through the public reading of scriptures and the public proclamation we have heard a little Word.

But we are not just called to be washed, to be fed, and to hear... In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you Free.*" We are called to be a wellspring of God's word—a source of life and hope for our community. The Word of God is a *Good Word* because it is a *LIBERATING* word. We are not sent to share this Good Word because we *have to*, but because we are *freed in Christ* to do so. Our Lord is sending us to bear his liberating word to a weary world. And if we immerse ourselves in these ways—water, meal, and proclamation—then we will know what little Word to share.

If we immerse ourselves in our baptismal calling, perhaps we'll share a little Word of forgiveness, unity, and hope that were spoken over those waters.

If we nourish ourselves at the Lord's Table, perhaps we'll share a little Word of mercy, reconciliation, and covenant that were spoken over that bread and wine.

If we renew ourselves around God's Word read and proclaimed in our midst, perhaps we'll share a little Word of grace, love, and the in-breaking of God's kingdom *here and now* not in some far-off time...

And yet there are weeks like this one, where many of us our find ourselves at a loss for words. We don't know what to say. We don't even have a little word to share...

And so we're meant to listen.

The heart of the Lutheran movement is rooted in the trust that 500 some years ago God was speaking, calling, moving through the work of the Holy Spirit to enliven and enlighten the reformers of old to restore Christ's church in the proclamation of love and grace that cannot be purchased with human coin or our own noble merit. And the heart of the Lutheran movement today is rooted in the trust that God is **STILL speaking, calling, moving** through the work of the Holy Spirit to enliven and enlighten US to receive and proclaim this little word of life, hope, love, and grace when we find our voice again.

Until we find our voice, God is speaking a little word of Grace that names you and claims you as beloved children. God is speaking a little word of Grace that absolves us of sin and sends us out to walk in new found freedom. God is speaking a little word of Grace that is the still small voice of hope in the midst of grief. God is speaking a little word of Grace that knows and loves the authentic you that you hide from others for fear of rejection and God LOVES that authentic you. God is speaking a little word of Grace that is calling us to engage in the work of reformation here and now, liberating our neighbors for the shackles of isolation, injustice, oppression, and indifference to suffering.

In the midst of all that would work to silence or drown out the sound of God's little word, *I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*, who is the one little word of love spoken again and again over the brokenness of creation.

God is still speaking, and I pray you find your voice to proclaim that little word of life, hope, love, and grace. But today, I pray you close your eyes and listen as our choir sings our beloved Lutheran anthem. Listen for that one little word of our ever living God, who is relentlessly speaking us back to everlasting life with a word of life, hope, love, and grace. Amen.