

October 31, 2021 – Reformation Day

Y conocerán la verdad y la verdad os hará libres...

The words of John 8:32 are ingrained into my memory as emblazoned on the back of dozens of mint green polo shirts that belonged to my students at the Claren Lehman Christian Education Center in Santo Domingo.

The kids would line up in lines each morning before the red, white and blue of the Dominican national flag -- of which Pastor Fidel loved to regale visitors from the United States and Canada with the fact -- is the only such banner to bear an image of a Bible. A Bible with the page open to that very verse, the latter half of which can be made out with keen eyesight or proper magnification.

The truth will make you free.

Probably not a coincidence that this school where Vanessa and I were teaching selected the same line of Scripture from the flag for the school uniforms.

But whereas the daily ritual of beginning the day with a pledge of allegiance of sorts was familiar from our own school days, what to do in this particular circumstance was not. It didn't seem right to join the kids and the rest of the faculty and staff in placing our hands over our hearts or saluting. We aren't Dominicans after all and this wasn't our flag.

I settled on drawing on another childhood experience to figure out appropriate decorum. That of watching the Olympics on TV. During the medal ceremonies, three flags would ascend to the rafters in order of height by order of finish, much as the athletes would be assembled on the podium. But only one nation's anthem, that of the gold medal winner would be played. Usually the cameras would then

zoom in on the winner or winners, in the case of a team event, and tears shed, words mouthed or sung along to.

Silver and bronze medalists were peripheral ... what were *they* doing? Not much. I could picture them just standing hands behind their backs, or folded in front of them, maybe, and just standing silently but respectfully until the song was over.

So that's what I decided to do after a while, for the rest of the year, instead of hanging out in the office or waiting in my classroom and avoiding the ceremony altogether, greeting the kids after the morning chorus in the courtyard.

I think I got the tone right in this fashion but it never stopped feeling awkward.

It feels a bit awkward, too, to be drawn into this dialogue between Jesus and those among the Judeans who, John tells us, *had believed* in him but obviously the relationship became fraught to say the least.

Before the end of the chapter, Jesus has called these friends-turned-foes sons of the devil and they call him demon-possessed and try to stone him to death.

It's the kind of tension you walk into the middle of and feel it in an instant, and all you want to do is turn around and walk right the other way, if for nothing else than to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

The concerns of John and his newly blossoming Christian faith community are not the same as our concerns today but we ought not to avoid the tension here because we know such conflict continues to arise throughout history. We commemorate today the beginning of the Reformation of the church 504 years ago, a movement that began with Martin Luther's very public dispute with an ecclesial hierarchy he found to be corrupt and which garnered him a death warrant. We do so as part of a Lutheran denomination believers have left in more recent years over disputes about women's

ordination, ecumenical partnerships and human sexuality. As heart-wrenching as those divisions have been, they have thankfully evolved to a point where they can occur without the bloodshed that marked the earliest years of the church and that ravaged Central Europe for generations after Luther had come and gone.

Amidst relative peace, we have freedom to consider what it is that Jesus is talking about when he speaks of freedom. Luther interpreted it as paradox: “*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*” That is to say, freedom with responsibility.

Freedom that is inseparable from the truth and has its source in the embodied, lived, true being of Jesus. Freedom to love as he first loved us, without conditions or hesitation. Freedom to see the world as it really is and to follow Christ

on his path to making it as it should be. Freedom from the lies we are told and the lies we tell ourselves.

Those Jesus confronted who once believed in him offer a preposterous response in John's Gospel. Children of Abraham never slaves to anyone? What about Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, even Rome? What's so obvious to us looking from outside seems to utterly escape those who feel slighted and insulted.

But we all have our flaws. Our church born of the Reformation somewhere along the line lost sight of the vibrance that is found in continually reforming. In the New World, Lutherans relied for too long on boats bringing more Lutherans from the Old World ashore. Our identity that should be primary, a focus on the grace that flows through the current of faith, grew dimmer than secondary cultural quirks like an affinity for lutefisk, lefse and lingonberries. Things that our siblings in growing Lutheran church bodies

in places like Ethiopia, Indonesia and India might not recognize at all.

We know we have our blind spots. We admit it with some regularity ... if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. That's out of the tradition of John, too. It's consistent. But for all the damage our sin, our missing the mark God places in front of us, for all that the trouble it does and causes in our lives and the lives of those touched by our own, Jesus offers forgiveness and a path forward.

And he's not going anywhere. He gives us the freedom to come to him whenever we need and say, we don't know what we're doing. We seem to be getting it all wrong. He gives us the inspiration to re-form ourselves and our community to be more like him, even when we have strayed far off. He gives us peace to reconcile and put away old

grudges, it doesn't matter if they are against Catholics, Jews, evangelicals or even fellow Lutherans.

And it's not an instant transformation. We need to be – and we are – forgiven again. And again. But we find our way, and come to better understand that it isn't in fact, *our* way, but The Way that leads us to deeper truth, more expansive and meaningful freedom and what is truly good in life.

It's an ongoing process, daily renewal in the written and the living Word, infused with joy, that gives us the energy and enthusiasm to shout "Freedom!" like my students did every weekday morning and surely will again tomorrow. A shout I found I could join with them in, even if seeing it from a different experience, another angle.

¡Libertad!