

## John 8:31-32

We are two years away from the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Church. But there would never have been a Lutheran Church to begin with had Martin Luther caved under pressure. When he nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, he had no concept of what was about to happen -- that Satan would rage with all of his might against him. The persecution that followed the Reformation was so intense against Luther, and all who stood with him, that clearly we can say it is by God's grace alone that the Lutheran Church was born and still stands today.

Many Lutherans may not appreciate our rich heritage. But it certainly is no stretch of the truth to say that were it not for Luther and the Reformation, you and I would not know the Gospel. We would not have the assurance of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Rather, we would still be living under the Law, and the power of sin and the fear of judgment would constantly rule over us.

But the truth has set you free. It set Luther free. And God then worked through him to proclaim this truth into all the world, even here in Augusta, Missouri. So you have the truth. You are baptized into Him who is the truth. You were taught, catechized in the truth...confirmed at God's altar, promising to continue and live in the truth.

And there's that word. Jesus uses it in our text. The word "continue." "*If you continue in My Word...*" He says. Oh how He knows our human nature! How easy it is for us to begin; how hard it is for us to continue. How many projects haven't we begun around the house! How many of them have we completed? Satan doesn't care about our household projects. But he does care about us continuing in Jesus' Word. He urges on our sinful nature to take exception with that word "continue."

And we are only too happy to comply. We treat the Bible like it's a hot potato. We were forced to hold it in our hands and read it in Confirmation Class. But soon after, we dropped it from our hands. And even though opportunities abound to pick it up in our daily life, and to study it, we would rather pick up a magazine, a newspaper, or the TV remote, or perhaps a hammer or a hunting rifle.

But we think we're Jesus' disciples because we began. But that's not what makes a disciple. "*If you continue in My Word,*" He says, "*you are My disciples.*" It seems that churches have lots of members, but few disciples. No wonder churches struggle to pay their bills. No wonder churches struggle to grow. Hell is full of those who began in Jesus' Word, but did not continue.

The devil tried to keep Luther from continuing. But God stepped in. And if you and I are to continue today, it's not because we had good intentions the day we were confirmed; it's because God steps in, and He fights against our stubborn nature; and He, in mercy, causes us to continue in the truth.

God knows a thing or two about continuing. He continued to send prophet after prophet to His rebellious people. They killed them, one after another. But it wasn't good enough for God just to begin. He continued to warn His people. He continued to show mercy.

Another word for continue is the word “abide.” “*If you abide in My Word...*” God continued with us rebellious sinners to the point where He came to abide with us. He chose our human flesh to be His dwelling place, not to punish us; to redeem us from our sin.

God stepped into our world in the flesh of Jesus Christ. And Jesus continued for us everything that we have only just begun, but have failed to continue. Your works, and mine, although begun with good intentions, fall short of God’s expectations. Jesus continued those works for you. They are finished, complete and perfect in every way.

Jesus continued the journey to the cross for you. He accepted the punishment of your sins and mine. He chose suffering over glory, death over life. He completed the work of your redemption. He finished the task of purchasing for you a place in heaven with His precious blood. All this is made your own because that which God began in you in your Baptism, He continues in you through your abiding in His Word.

Friend, you’re not going to continue as Jesus’ disciple because you’re supposed to, nor will I. You will continue in Jesus’ Word because you love His Word, and you want to make His Word your abode, your dwelling place. Why would you do that? Because His words are sweet to your ears. Jesus came to abide with you because He loves you dearly. See Him not as a stern-faced Judge, but as your Beautiful Savior who smiles upon you; who loves nothing more than to forgive you day after day. He picks up where you fall short. He continues where you only begin. He pardons where you fail.

The word that Jesus wants you to abide in, more than any other word, is His word to you that you are forgiven. Everything in your past that is so wrong - it’s all forgiven. Not because you try to love Him...not because of anything you have done. Jesus forgives you because He died upon a cross for you.

And what He begins, He continues. His abiding presence is seen with your eyes, and tasted with your mouth, in the Sacrament on the altar. Since you and I continue to struggle with our sinful flesh, Jesus continues to forgive. There is no end to His mercy. That mercy is for you no matter how you have lived. The more sin you have to confess, the more forgiveness God has for you.

Every sinner has been declared forgiven by our merciful God. All church members, along with all sinners, are forgiven. And those who are Jesus’ disciples believe it. And it shows in how they...in how you live, give, and forgive others.

Today, and every day that you are in the sweet words of Jesus, is not an ending; it is but a continuing. Just as we continue the Reformation by proclaiming the Gospel, so God continues to preserve you in Christ as His forgiven disciples by making His Word of truth your dwelling place. Amen.