

Rev. Kurt Cockran, Risen Savior Lutheran Church (Basehor, KS), Reformation Day, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021

## Martyrs of the Word

John 8:31-36

Let us pray. Sanctify us in your truth, your Word is truth.

In one way, we're in a unique era in church history. Apathy over religious beliefs reigns supreme. Many in our world today call this a victory. For nearly 400 years, it seemed like battles and bloodshed over the specifics of Christianity were part of regular life. But now in our world, these fights over doctrine and the blood baths that can go with them no longer rage, but instead apathy has won out. While we give thanks that many no longer resort to bloodshed over disputes of doctrine, it is unfortunately true that apathy is, in fact, worse, and in this way, the devil has won. At least, he's won in what was formerly known as Christendom. The solution to these blood-filled fights over doctrine was always word-filled fights; that is, respectful debate. To be sure, with politics so intermingled with the church, a lot of the disputes that turned into warfare were often politically instead of religiously driven. Those truly listening to the Scriptures (either a ruler or a theologian) knew the true battle was not with weapons, but with words and persuasion of the Scriptures: the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.

But at least back then the battle was still wanting to be fought. People by and large believed that words about God mattered, that when somebody tarnishes the name of the Lord, that that actually causes spiritual harm.

Here, we have no such apathy. Or at least we should have no such apathy. Truth matters, and false doctrine kills. The devil remains fierce in tempting many away to false doctrine, but now instead of open and publicly, he does so subtly in the conscience, especially as ideas opposed to the Gospel seep through our various information devices from people we would otherwise never interact with.

So we should always remain on guard, and we can learn much from that battle 500 years ago. Yes, the specific issues aren't as big today: indulgences, the pope's authority, the sacraments and the like. But at the heart of it all was a battle over the Word, and that is still the heart of the battle today. The Son of God said, "If you live in these words that I speak, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Free from whom? Freed from the grasp of the devil, that liar and father of all lies. We are freed, for the stronger man, Jesus Christ of Sabaoth Lord, has broken into the devil's home, overcome him, taken away his might, and Christ reclaims His own people for the heavenly Father. We are no longer slaves of the evil one. We are God's own sons. Forever. One little Word *can* fell him, and it is the Word made flesh, He who was in the beginning, who was with God, and who was God. He is the Life against the darkness of this world. He is the full gift of the truth against the father of lies. Such comfort is worth clinging to, no matter what.

The blood-soaked debates of old means that martyrdom was always a very imminent possibility for many. Yet even if today the violence has subsided, martyrdom is still well and alive in our country, but just less physically bloody. Yet the martyrdom is still quite real. Many in here perhaps know this bloodless martyrdom well: the suffering of enduring shame and sorrow for the name of Christ. Faithfulness always comes with a cost.

Today, when the devil aims his darts at *your* hearts, typically he doesn't bring a radical Taliban Muslim to your doorstep and simply ask you if you're a Christian. Instead, he comes to you through people you actually kind of like, especially in families. He comes through well-intended people who might say something like, "I don't think we should discuss and debate theology. I don't think we should speak about doctrine and dogma. We don't need to fuss about the Bible. It's more important that we simply love each other." And when you push back, one

who would then say, “are your religious beliefs really that important to get in the way of us?” The devil also wants to keep your religion as merely just one aspect of your life, never essential and fundamental to your very *essence* of what makes you truly the Lutheran Christian you. The devil wants your being Christian to be like how you wear your winter coat these days, good for when it’s chilly in the morning, but otherwise can be set aside if it gets in the way. So, the temptation is to be a Christian on Sunday, but of the world the other 6 days in order to play along to get along.

That... those temptations...are a fiercer weapon of the devil than any sword or barrel of a gun. The devil knows Jesus better than you do, and so he knows what makes you a Christian. It isn’t your nice cozy goosebump feelings for Jesus. It’s the *words* of Jesus. It’s the truth Jesus speaks. Jesus said that if you love me, you will treasure my words. If you love me, you will make your whole life about what I say, so that you’re connected to my words like a branch is connected to a vine. But if you disconnect yourself from hearing His words, if you elevate a generic love over love grounded in me, the Truth made flesh, you become like a branch broken off from the vine, and Jesus says such a one “is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” The devil hears that from Jesus and says, “alright, there’s then my goal. Keep people away from the words (the doctrine) of Jesus. Twist it however I can.”

And if you’re one who can easily handle being thought of as a little weird in the family for making such a big deal of the name of your God, begin preparing for a little more than mere social ostracizing. Other bloodless penalties are on the horizon. Fines, censorship, canceling. Our world has many various tactics, and faithful Christians are right in the crosshairs.

After all, to many in our day, the Bible is just one more weapon that those in power – white straight males such as myself – use in order to oppress historically marginalized groups. To say publicly that women and men *are* different in many ways even while being equally valuable in the eyes of God will get you censored on Twitter. In the mind of the progressive, truth comes not from God, but from those who have experienced the alleged weight of racism, discrimination, and oppression. The top-selling books of the last few years, “white fragility” and “how to be an anti-racist” might as well be retitled, “how to be an anti-Christian.”

We are all witnesses – that’s what the word martyr means, witness – we are all witnesses to a truth that stands firm and cannot change and which we don’t want to change. The world’s truths may change every other year depending on who has power, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.

So how do we practice for these days of testing and witnessing? By asking *this* particular question of each other, “*why* are you a Christian? *Why* are you a Lutheran? Why do you come here weekly? Why is this important?”

These are the questions that undergird a firm solid faith that cannot be broken, a faith that is not a mental assent to mere historical facts, and also not a mere feeling. Your answer exhibits your *trust*. Faith goes beyond the mind. Faith is the assurance that we have sins to be forgiven, and we have a Savior who indeed does bring such forgiveness by the death and resurrection of the Son of God and Son of Mary. Faith is the confidence and hope and *trust* that death is defeated, and Satan stripped of his power, so every ruler and power and authority in our day *also* stripped of their power. Faith clings to the truth that since we have already died with Christ, *nothing* can take away God’s abundant mercy toward us.

This faith then speaks with every ounce of courage because the Lord of hosts is on our side. It is the sure and certain assurance that salvation is from God and God alone, and is delivered by God through His Word in water, bread, wine, and the stern message of Law and the sweet consolation of the Gospel, that you may simply have life and life abundant. This eternal life is not earned by your own works or decision, but received as a gift, so that no one may boast.

This is the gift of the Reformation: the battles over the truth of the Word against the so-called “truths” of our day are worth fighting for. But take heart. The battle’s been won. The kingdom ours remaineth. Amen.