

Reformation Day (observed): October 27, 2024
“Reformation Still”

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Violence against the word of God and God’s people is not in short supply. His word is violently attacked and violent men are always trying to snatch it away. As we come ever closer to the world’s fascination with death and then less than a week later the election, rhetoric and visual aids abound that reinforce the idea that we are doomed. There is no hope for the end of violence, unless you vote for the “correct” candidate who will magically somehow fix everything you ever deemed to be bad or scary.

While this generation is different in many ways, it holds some important similarities to the generations described by Jesus in Matthew 11. The playing of the flute is a word that is directly tied to the joyful liturgical celebrations in 1 and 2 Samuel. The dirge recalls the songs of mourning like Isaiah 32 and 1 Samuel 25. The point is that God has given the gift of music to carry the word of God for the sake of mankind to help with endurance. Music easily reaches emotions and can even do so without words. This is why Lutherans have been known as the singing church. Music is the handmaiden of the Gospel. You can more readily recall words set to music than you can long theological treatises. You could more easily recite a hymn than you could a sermon. And even though you might not readily admit it to me, knowing how much time is put into sermons, you could easily list your top 5 favorites hymns; but do you have top 5 favorite sermons, by which I mean you could recite word for word what was said, just like your favorite hymns?

The hymns we sing are of great importance. A few weeks ago, you may remember that part of the sermon was based upon the hymn we just sang again for our sermon hymn. It is a conversation that the church cries out to God in the midst of death and turmoil, and the Lord responds with deep words of love and care for you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. He knows of the violence and He knows of your need for strength and endurance. He knows where hope-true, everlasting hope-is to be found. It is His and He gives it to you.

As we celebrate the reformation, it is still not about Luther, or John, or Elijah. It remains still ever based upon what those men preached: sola scriptura (Scripture alone), solus Christus (Christ alone), sola fide (faith alone), sola gratia (grace alone), and soli Deo gloria (glory to God alone).

There are really important things, eternally important things, that God would have us know in the Scriptures. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And behold, it was very good. God created man in His own image, and behold, *he* was very good. Yet man in his lust for power and forbidden knowledge could not maintain that perfection even a single human generation, and all creation was plunged into an ongoing struggle for superiority and power. Satan's treachery and wicked act of deception did not end in Genesis 3; he has been the father of lies from that time until the present. Abel suffered violence for his pleasing sacrifice; his blood cried out to the Lord. In many and various ways, God's people, have suffered violence at the hands of the Lord's enemies.

In time, God raised up a mighty prophet. Elijah was not a man that we would readily put in polite society, and he wasn't known for his political correctness. Elijah was relentless in his defense of God's Word. "Sacrifices are to be made in Jerusalem," he warned. There were many in his day who saw no problem with worshiping any god, or even a different confession, what really mattered in the end was convenience. Then there were others who saw no problem with bringing other gods into the worship of the palace. There is room for other faiths, other confessions, other gods, what really mattered is that we coexist.

Elijah did not give his approval. He did not permit it under the guise of tolerance, acceptance, or fear of being called a bully. The prophets of Baal would have been happy with a tolerant arrangement and to worship whatever god you wish. Elijah's utter intolerance toward idolatry is what set them against him in such vile hatred. Elijah warns wicked King Ahab of a drought so severe that neither dew nor rain would fall. After many days, in the third year, Elijah confronts Ahab: ***And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals."*** It takes no small amount of courage to say those words to a king who is quick to kill those with whom he disagrees.

In time, God raised up a mighty prophet. This time, John was sent to prepare the way for the Lord. Like Elijah, he found himself not in the favor of the ruling class. Like Elijah, no one ever called John nice, or tolerant, or polite. Like Elijah, he didn't care. You could tell a John sermon by the word *repent*. He spoke it to those who came to be baptized in the Jordan. He spoke it to the Pharisees. He spoke it to Herod. He told Herod the tetrarch exactly what God thought of taking his brother's wife. Herod did not repent at the prophet's rebuke, and as you know, John was beheaded in prison. Violent men seeking to snatch away hope by killing God's messengers.

Between John the Baptist and Luther, the Church endured martyrdom under Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian, among many others. Rome crumbled, fell into decay, and became yet another chapter in Western history. The Church endured, thanks to a God who protected her and preserved her even under the threat of murderous Caesars. The Church endured Saracens and Turks. Inside the Church, however, lay a threat which jeopardized the very Gospel.

Forgiveness of sins was for sale, and it didn't come cheaply. While buying time off of purgatory was a successful fundraiser, common people had no assurance of salvation. Life was a constant stream of doubt and fear about their soul and the souls of loved ones. No sacrifice was too great to help the faithful departed out of paying the consequence of sin, they thought. In Church Fathers like Augustine, in faithful father/confessors like Johannes von Staupitz, and in Biblically literate and inquisitive monks, God maintained the true Gospel, even as the wider church was violent toward it.

Again, God raised up a prophet. Daring to question these practices earned Luther and his followers a permanent expulsion from Holy Mother Rome. Excommunication meant further fracturing of the church, which would lead to uncountable further fragments. But in being fractured from the Roman Magisterium, the fledgling Lutherans were free to preach the free forgiveness of sins. God's grace has no price above the blood of His only-begotten Son. Calvary was the exact and full price of the redemption of man. Not a single penny more had ever been required above the suffering and death of the Son of Man. In His death, He procured life for all. In his innocent suffering, He spared the guilty. And once again, God saw fit for His Gospel to have free course in His church, unencumbered by the rules of man. The kingdom was again recovered from the violent by our Lord Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Today we celebrate the Festival of the Reformation. Today you have opportunity to reflect on what God has done for you by preserving the pure Gospel for your longing ears, that He would create and sustain faith within you. Today you gather with other Lutherans and sing the great Lutheran hymns with gusto. “The Kingdom ours remaineth.” “Curb pope and Turk – these are the original words – who by the sword would wrest the Kingdom from Thy Son, and bring to naught all He has done.” We sing of how Truth triumphed over error. We rejoice that we are freed from the demands of the Bishop of Rome. And all this makes no one happier than Satan and our Old Adam.

Just as much as you rejoice today, you are also tempted. Tempted to put your feet up and gloat over a job well done. Tempted to stick your tongue out at Rome as though we had only won a football game. Tempted to believe that our work of confessing the truth has been accomplished. Tempted to think that since Luther did, you don’t have to.

The work of Reformation did not end in 1517. For that matter, it did not end in 1530, 1577, 1580, 1847, 1941, or 2023. The kingdom of heaven still suffers violence, and God is still raising up faithful men to speak. We Americans were spoiled by a couple centuries of relatively easy living, in that there were cultural norms that assisted in the preservation of God’s Word, but the Constantinian Accommodation is over. Christianity less and less enjoys the place it once held in American thought and society. Today’s pluralism invites Baal and Moloch alongside Yahweh.

Most Americans would deny that they worship Baal, but prevailing attitudes human sexuality as the be all and end all about everything, suggest otherwise. Likewise, the false god Moloch commanded that children be sacrificed in order to secure wealth and happiness. Both Baal and Moloch ritual practices involved the sacrifice of children, and today, even seek to mandate that the Church be complicit in the murder of children for the sake of convenience. The violent don’t need to use swords and guns; they often use the violence of compulsion and veiled cultural threats. The Church possesses God’s Word, and she is called to speak this truth whether it is well-received or not. The Church needs Christians of boldness and conviction to speak God’s truth fearlessly. This is why we sing these truths and commit them to memory. We recall them in the times of joy and in mourning and everything in-between.

Christ and Him crucified, this is the heart of Lutheranism. Around the world, Lutherans are proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ – free forgiveness only because the Son of Man was crucified for them. There are not too many world Lutherans that get misty-eyed at the story of the Saxon migration, but they *are* yearning to hear that they are reconciled to their Almighty Creator in Christ. After all, today is not about Luther, or Walther. It's not even about Elijah or John. Today, as every day, it's about Jesus.

He has called us to do much good in the world, speaking the truth in love at all times, and we often choose to serve ourselves. We may have chosen to remain silent where you ought to have spoken. And He forgives you. His blood covers your cowardice, your silence, and your inaction.

He did not shrink from the violence done to Him. He gave His life for you and for all on Calvary's cross. By that dreadful violence you are saved! Where you have failed to confess, He never fails to confess you before His Father, pleading for you at the Father's right hand.

Look through the history of salvation; God has preserved His people through extraordinary opposition and hatred. The whole time, God continued to raise up prophets to speak to change the hearts of men. How much more will He preserve us? Today, the Church faces challenges no one dreamed of 20 years ago. Today, He continues to give His Church the courage to speak to a hateful world. The violent seek to take the kingdom by force. Christians suffer. But no one snatches us out of the hand of our loving God. He has called you together – sheep who hear the voice of the Shepherd. Wherever the Gospel is preached in the world, there will be trouble. But, your salvation is secure.

God provided Elijah to the world. He also provided John the Baptist and Martin Luther, to speak the Truth to a perishing world. Men of violence will never overcome the Church. Maybe Christians will again have to resort to worshiping in secret, as we did before the Fourth Century, maybe not.

It doesn't matter; the same Jesus who has raised up strong voices in every generation will continue to provide voices of humility and strength in the face of any trouble. He will preserve His Bride until that Day when He calls all the dead from their graves and all who have died in faith, or are still living in faith when He returns, will live in a glorious Resurrection.

With all boldness and confidence, we will sing:

Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill;
They shall not overpow'r us.
This world's prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none.
He's judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him.

The Word they still shall let remain
Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain
With His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone,
Our vict'ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**Prayer of the Church
Reformation Day (Observed)
27 October 2024**

In peace, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For thankful and steadfast hearts to receive God's Word, that He would enable us to keep it and bring forth its good fruit in our lives, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For faithful hearts, that we would remain steadfast in the Word of God and never follow false gospels that lead us away from His truth; and for pastors who will preach with purity and joy that we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who lead our land, that they would use power rightly for the preservation of order, the accomplishment of justice, the protection of life and the defense of the weak; and for wise, godly and faithful leaders who will follow the Lord's commands and serve with integrity, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who celebrate baptismal anniversaries this week, especially *Mike and Kris*; and for those who celebrate another year of earthly life, especially *Alicia, Emily and Markie*; that God would send His holy angels to guard and keep His children; that they may thank and praise him for the gift of life and for the protection and care He has provided; that God would grant them to grow in grace, continue to know His loving-kindness, abide in the confession of His care and protection, serve Him faithfully all the days of their life and finally come to the fullness of His joys in heaven; let us pray to the Lord: **Lord have mercy.**

For the joy and blessings that God has granted *Terry & Kathy and Tom & Robin* during the years of their marriage; that God would assist them always by His grace that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may ever honor and keep their marriage vows, grow in love towards Him and for each other, and come

For all who face adversity of any kind, especially *Dick, Esther, Ruth, Ken, Ann, William, Zoey, Jeri, Pastor Small, Debbie, the Central Iowa Dance team and those we name in our hearts*, that God would comfort them by His Holy Spirit, and that they may meet the days ahead with courage and with Hope in God's never-failing love, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all who commune, that in the worthy eating and drinking of the Sacrament they may have the certainty of forgiveness in Christ, who was set forth as the propitiation for our sins by His blood, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

Preserve Your Church, O Lord, and each of us as members of Christ's Body, that we may not surrender the true Gospel for any reason, but be kept in this faith and fear throughout the days of our earthly pilgrimage, until that day when we and all Your people shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the reward You have prepared for us and all who have loved His appearing; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**