

Matthew 11.12-15
The Feast of the Reformation
Tuesday, 31 October 2017
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

There are two, alternate, Gospels provided for the Feast of the Reformation.

We heard one of them on Sunday: "If you remain in My Word," Jesus said, "you are My disciples indeed; and you will know the truth; and the truth will set you free."

These words of Jesus focus in with laser sharpness on one of the key Reformation *solas*: *sola Scriptura*. Because here Jesus extols the power and might of His Word. And lays down the immutable reality and truth: To have Christ. And to have His life for your life. And His death in place of your death. And His heaven as your heaven. And His holiness and righteousness as yours, you have to have His Word.

For it is Scripture, God's Word, alone, that tells us not only what we must do in this life to lead a life pleasing to God, but that gives us Christ. It is a word from the outside. A rescue to fallen sinners. That tears down and grinds to dust the idols of the heart. And in their place sets up Christ. And Him crucified for my sins.

But there's another Gospel for the Reformation. The one we just heard: From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.

Now, this Gospel doesn't so much extol the Word as its fruits. It doesn't so much focus on the *source* as on what it does. And it finds what it does in the life of Christians and in the suffering of the kingdom of heaven.

You see, John came preaching repentance. He came preaching a message that said our sins and our sinfulness just won't cut the mustard with God. That God in His holiness and righteousness deplores sin. And must destroy the sinner.

But John also came preaching that there was a Helper. You remember that scene don't you? After John had baptized Jesus—the day after—he say Jesus again. And he pointed to Jesus and preached to the crowds gathered around him, "Behold, the Lamb of God who bears and takes away the sin of the world. Behold, the Son of God who takes sin to Himself and kills it in His own death. And breaks its claim on fallen men. And in the place the sinner's sin gives His own righteous deeds. And in the place of the sinner's death gives life. And in the place of the hell and condemnation and eternal separation from God Himself gives heaven and eternal fellowship with God." That was John's message. His chief message.

And John said that all of that—the righteousness required before God—wasn't available to you by trying harder. Through being more sincere. By getting yourself more motivated or by taking the first step. It was available to you in one way only. And it hangs on the first word of his proclamation: "Behold." "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Look," John says. "Trust and have faith

in Him alone. Because what this One has is available to you only by looking at and upon and to Christ alone.” That was John’s message. Turn from your sin. Believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. And you will be saved.

And that message does just what it commands: it creates faith. Faith in Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Faith that Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, has propitiated the wrath of God against sin and sinners through His perfect life and innocent death. Faith that through Jesus Christ, the way to the Father is opened—Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And that faith? It’s the fruit of the Word. It’s what the Word does. For wherever the Word is proclaimed it creates the believing hearts it requires.

That was John’s preaching. And now look at what Jesus says about it. “the kingdom of heaven suffers violence; and the violent take it by force.”

Why? Because this faith in the Son of God. This faith that the Lord has given you in your Baptism and nourished by His holy Word and Sacrament. This faith is nothing if not tenacious. Look at what Jesus is saying here: the kingdom of heaven suffers violence! Where is that kingdom of heaven? It’s wherever faith in Christ is found. It’s wherever His Word is proclaimed in its truth and purity. It’s wherever the Word is active in water, bread, and wine to bring the forgiveness of sins. And it’s nothing short of a miracle that that kingdom stands. Because it stands against powerful enemies. It stands against your own flesh and Old Adam that doesn’t want anything to do with Christ and His Word. It stands against the compound, manifold assaults of the world against you. It stands against every demonic ploy of Satan and his minions.

You see, what Jesus is doing and saying here is this: “You might not think much of this kingdom of God. After all, it doesn’t look like much. It’s only the Word and faith in the Son. You would have thought a long time ago that such a little thing would have fallen to pieces. But it’s not such a mean thing, after all. Because it still stands.”

And that, too, is a key teaching of the Reformation. For faith takes God at His own promises. And God gives His promises in His Word. Wherever His Word is, there are His promises. And wherever His promises are, they create faith. That is the kingdom of heaven.

And that faith that stands on the promises of God’s Word is hardly a nothing. An emotion. A high. A something that can go as easily as it comes.

Instead, it is an utter confidence. An utter confidence that the Lord God who raised His Son Jesus Christ from the dead can and will raise me from the dead. An utter confidence that the Lord God who in His Son spoke to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven you,” can even today with nothing but a word forgive sins. No claptrap. No indulgences. No money in the coffer. Just a word. It’s an utter confidence that the God who spoke creation into existence and His own Son into the womb of the Blessed Virgin can by a word speak His Son into bread and wine. No magic. No voodoo. Just a word. God’s Word. And it’s an utter confidence that the God who by His Word caused the rain to fall in Noah’s day and flood the entire world and yet saved Noah through the flood can likewise through water taken at His Word save from eternal death.

And that utter confidence cannot be shaken. No flesh. No Old Adam. No persecution in and from the world. No assault of the devil. None of it can shake this Word-wrought confidence in the promises of God in Christ Jesus.

And that's what the history of the Reformation teaches.

Picture it. 1521. A scrawny little monk. Standing before the Holy Roman Emperor. The most powerful powerplay in the world at the time. His flesh trembled. The Old Adam hated every minute of it. The cards were stacked against him. Nearly every power of government and church stood against him. And Satan whispered in his ear, "Are you sure this is what God actually said." The kingdom of heaven suffers violence.

But the kingdom of heaven can never take it lying down. And from trembling lips of that insignificant little monk were heard the words. "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." It was a superhuman stance. We shouldn't be slapping old Martin on the back for it. Because what caused him to utter those words didn't come gushing forth from his own heart, but from faith, faith in the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, who raised Him from the dead. Faith, God's gift to Brother Martin through His Word.

And if you still think that this kingdom of heaven is some "nothing" you shouldn't think much of, just look.

In 1521, the Reformation had no chance of survival. How then has the kingdom of heaven come to you?

In 1817 on the 300th anniversary of the Reformation, the Prussian Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm III outlawed the Evangelical Lutheran Church from one end of Germany to the other. How then has the kingdom of heaven come to you?

In the 1960s and 1970s the critics of Scripture who didn't so much as believe a word of it had taken over the Missouri Synod seminary in St. Louis. The Word? Gone. Faith? Gone. How then has the kingdom of heaven come to you?

And in recent decades the world has, it seems, arrayed itself against all that is wholesome and good and holy and God Himself and made it harder and harder to be and remain a Christian and left the holy Christian Church looking like a plucked chicken. And our flesh agrees. But let me ask you: how then has the kingdom of heaven come to you?

There's nothing new here, of course. For from the time of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence. So how in the world—pray tell!—has the kingdom come to you?

It has come to you because the Word is no mean thing. And the divine gift of faith in that Word is no mean thing. And against all the violence brought against the kingdom, faith fights back. Violently. And with force. Not with swords and guns, to be sure. Not with jujitsu and karate. Instead, the faith of the faithful absolutely refuses to have the Word and Christ taken from it; and the faith of the faithful clings tenaciously to God's promises in Christ. It's a faith that thinks nothing of either death or life. That doesn't concern itself with angels or rulers. That isn't shaken by things present or things to come. That doesn't shrink before power; and fears neither height nor depth. Yes, that could not care less about anything else in all creation. Why? Because it has God's Word; and through God's holy Word, it has God's promises in Christ. The Redeemer from this present evil age.

That's your Reformation heritage. Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr' vergehet nun und nimmermehr. Amen.

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