

The Festival of the Reformation (500th Anniversary)
St. Matthew 11:12-15: "500 Years of Violence; 500 Years of Victory"
October 29, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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EXORDIUM

On February 18, 1546, Martin Luther died. He had been the unquestioned leader of the Reformation movement since it started some thirty years earlier. Now this brilliant, steadfast, controversial man was gone. With Luther out of the picture, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, decided that the time was right for war against the Lutheran princes. He hoped first to subdue the Lutheran forces and then to stamp out the Lutheran faith. In April of the next year, 1547, the Lutheran armies were defeated at the Battle of Mühlberg. John Frederick the Magnanimous, the Elector of Saxony and Luther's good friend, was taken prisoner and sentenced to death. His life was spared only when he gave up his title and lands, including the town of Wittenberg, where Luther had lived and was buried.

What would happen to the Lutherans? Would Luther's important work be undone? There were some who gave in to the Emperor's demands. They compromised the clear teaching of the Gospel. But others boldly took their stand against the Emperor and his armies, knowing this could very well result in loss of property and life. With an unyielding spirit and a firm faith, they sang, "Still must they leave God's Word its might, / For which no thanks they merit; / Still is He with us in the fight, / With His good gifts and Spirit. / And should they, in the strife, / Take kindred, goods, and life, / We freely let them go, / They profit not the foe; / With us remains the kingdom" (ELH 251, v. 4).

Even if every earthly treasure were taken from them, they knew they possessed everything in Christ. They could not lose. The Gospel of God's abundant grace was theirs, and through it, His kingdom. This Word of grace is the great inheritance of the Reformation which has been passed down to us today, and which we are resolved to pass on to those who will follow after us. Let us therefore rise and sing, "God's Word Is Our Great Heritage" (TLH 283; ELH 583).

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Lord God, heavenly Father, we most heartily thank You that by Your Word You have brought us out of the darkness of error into the light of Your grace: We beseech You, mercifully help us to walk in that light, guard us from all error and false doctrine, and grant that we may not become ungrateful and despise and persecute Your Word, but receive it with all our heart, govern our lives according to it, and put all our trust in Your grace, through the merit of Your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH p. 165)

The sermon text for today is taken from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. / "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, the messianic Reformer who alone could overcome the violent enemies of mankind, dear fellow redeemed:

John the Baptizer had boldly preached God's truth. He had gone forth *"in the spirit and power of Elijah"* (Lk. 1:17) to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. He baptized Jesus in the Jordan River and pointed to him as *"the Lamb of God"* (Jn. 1:29). As Jesus began His public work, John continued to preach in the wilderness. Even the ruler of the land was not safe from his words. John openly declared that King Herod had sinned by taking the wife of his brother for himself. The king would not tolerate this. He arrested John and threw him in prison (Mk. 6:17). John had told the truth, but the truth was not welcome.

Jesus warned the disciples that this is how it would be for them too. *"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves,"* He said, *"so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.... [A]nd you will be hated by all for my name's sake"* (16-18, 22). They would be hated because they believed, taught, and confessed Jesus' name.

Doesn't it seem strange that anyone should get so worked up about mere words? Why not let people say whatever they want? How much harm can words do, as long as they are not accompanied by any sort of aggressive action? But the devil knows what a potent weapon words are, particularly *God's* words. He cannot tolerate God's Word. Wherever the Word of God is sown, the devil comes and tries to snatch it away, so that it cannot take root and grow in the heart (Mt. 13:19). Until the end of the world, the devil will throw everything he can against the work of the Word.

I

We see this in the way the apostles were attacked simply for preaching the Gospel. The same happened to the early Christians, as Satan incited the Roman authorities against them. The devil also poisoned the hearts of leaders within the church, so that they would attack the Word from the inside. Often these attacks were subtle, resulting in a gradual chipping away at the truth over time. But *"A little leaven leavens the whole lump"* (Gal. 5:9). By the time of the Reformation, the Gospel message of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus alone had largely been set aside. In its place, a complex system of private masses, indulgences, relics, pilgrimages, and other works of satisfaction had been established.

Some had tried to address these abuses in the church, and these men had either been muzzled or martyred, just like the apostles and prophets had been before them. Then God raised up Martin Luther. He was a loyal son of the Roman Church and took orders to become a monk. But as he studied the Word, Martin became convinced that serious errors had come into the church. He prepared *95 Theses* criticizing the sale of indulgences and nailed them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. He wanted them to be the topic of a public debate in the immediate region. Instead, these statements were copied, printed in bulk, and sent far and wide in Europe.

Little did Luther know that just four years later, he would be standing before the Holy Roman Emperor, who ordered him to take back everything he had written. This, he could not do. “[M]y conscience is captive to the Word of God” he said. “I cannot and will not recant.... God help me.” He surely needed God’s help, since both the Roman emperor and the Roman pope wanted him silenced – and by fire if necessary.

What should Luther do? By this time, he was one of the most famous and powerful men in Germany. Had he called for the sword to be taken up against the Roman authorities, many would have answered that call. But what good would it have done? We remember Peter who took out his sword to fight for Jesus. Jesus told him, “*Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword*” (Mt. 26:52). The sword of violence may be able to subdue outwardly, but it can never conquer the heart. The heart is conquered by a different kind of sword, “*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*” (Eph. 6:17).

Luther recognized this. He wrote, “I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything. Had I desired to foment trouble, I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany; indeed, I could have started such a game that even the emperor would not have been safe. But what would it have been? Mere fool’s play. I did nothing; I let the Word do its work” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 51, pp. 77-78).

II

The Word of God is the catalyst for the Christian’s victory, but it is also the catalyst for violence against the Church. The devil does all he can to snatch the Word away from people and people away from the Word. Jesus refers to this wicked activity when He says, “*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.*” How can the Christian stand against the persecutions, the pressure, the threats, and the lies the devil instigates?

The answer is: humbly and faithfully. Isn’t that what Jesus Himself did? The Apostle Peter writes that each Christian must take up the cross of suffering and follow after Jesus. “*For to this you have been called,*” he says, “*because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly*” (1Pe. 2:21-23).

But such a humble and faithful demeanor is not always what others see from us. Often, they see behavior that looks no different than how unbelievers are. We can be just as proud, just as petty in our disputes, just as eager to get revenge. Besides that, we worry. We worry that God will not protect us as well as He says He will. We let the devil's violence intimidate us, while ignoring the victory Jesus won for us.

God knows these weaknesses well. Nothing is hidden from Him. But He does not leave us to be overcome by the devil. He sent Jesus to rescue you. He sent Jesus to crush Satan's head and silence his accusations against you by giving His holy body and blood in payment for your sin. Then He rose from the dead on Easter in triumph over your death. Your greatest enemies, the ones that would do you eternal harm, have all been conquered by your Lord.

Not only that, but He continues to protect and bless you with His presence just as He promised, *"behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"* (Mt. 28:20). In his famous hymn, Luther says about the devil that "Strong mail of craft and pow'r / He weareth in this hour; / On earth is not his equal." But as powerful as Satan is, he cannot defeat you. Jesus fights for you - "The Lord of hosts, 'tis He / Who wins the victory / In ev'ry field of battle" (ELH 251, vv. 1, 2).

As we celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, we can look back at **500 Years of Violence** against the truth. God's Word will always be opposed in the devil's kingdom. But those **500 Years of Violence** are also **500 Years of Victory**. The Apostle John reminds us that *"he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world"* (1Jn. 4:4). The devil could not defeat Christ, and therefore he cannot defeat those who trust in Christ.

May the Lord continue to keep us steadfast in His Word, so that we remain in the saving faith and look confidently forward to our final victory by the power and grace of God.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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