

**THE FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION (OBSERVED)**

Text: St. Matthew 11:12-15

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

*“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”* So it was, in the days of our LORD. Oh, that such days would come again! For the violence our LORD speaks of is not done by the hands of evil men. The Kingdom of Heaven cannot be taken by the sword or by the strength of men. Murder and persecution, even Satan himself, cannot destroy it. No, the Kingdom of Heaven is stormed by the Word of God alone.

Therefore, our LORD does not speak here of physical violence, rather He speaks of the strength of the Word alone, received by hearts and souls struck by the Sword of the Spirit and overcome by the desire for, by the hunger for, salvation—salvation found only in our LORD and SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST.

Such hearts and souls were not to be denied and so by God’s grace, through God-given faith alone, they take hold of the Kingdom of Heaven; with penitent hearts, through repentance and prayer, they struggle and battle, storming the gates, and grasping hold of the Kingdom of Heaven as their reward, even as a triumphant warrior is rewarded with the spoils of war.

Such were the early days of the Church when CHRIST, Himself, had established His Kingdom upon the earth, sending out His Apostles to preach the Kingdom of Heaven to the four corners of the world. Perhaps the Church will never be blessed to see such fervor and growth again; only God Himself knows.

Yet, just as the Church has seen periods of spiritual decay, even so, she has witnessed periods of great spiritual recovery. Even when the Church seemed almost to have completely disappeared, even when she seems to have been forgotten, hearts and souls again became captive to the Word of God and were made soldiers of the true faith, enlisted in a spiritual war *“...against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*

Such was the time of the blessed Dr. Martin Luther who cast off his monk’s cowl of self-deprecation, self-degradation, and self-effacement when at last the SPIRIT of God opened to him the Gospel of our LORD through faith alone. With a joyful heart and a gladdened soul, having had his eyes opened to the truth of God’s love and compassion, having come to understand for the first time in his life that God’s righteousness did not mean his death and damnation, but rather, his life and salvation, Luther stormed the gates of Heaven with a passion and a faith unsurpassed by any who have come after him.

Just as Luther, so also the men and women of faith of his day who followed the banner of SOLA GRATIA, SOLA FIDE, SOLA SCRIPTURA, SOLA CHRISTUS, by GRACE ALONE, through FAITH ALONE, with SCRIPTURE ALONE, through CHRIST ALONE, and having been set free by the Gospel of CHRIST from the bondage of a corrupt Church that sold salvation for pieces of silver and gold, they were loosed from the chains that bound them in a world of darkness, fear, superstition, and heresy; they were released from the demands and tyranny of the Law and bondage to sin, Satan, and the grave. Having now reclaimed their freedom, they seized the Kingdom of Heaven, storming it and taking it by the force of their God-given faith.

Luther once wrote about our text, *“The Gospel is not preached in vain; there are people who hear it and love it violently so that they hazard body and life for the sake of God’s Word. Their conscience drives them on when they hear the Gospel, so that none can keep them away.”*

Such were the people of Luther’s day, but can we, today, claim the same? Where are those who would zealously give all, even their very lives, for the sake of the Gospel? Where are those who will storm the gates of heaven and claim for themselves the promise fulfilled nearly 2000 years ago? Where are those who are willing to meet death, rather than give up eternal life? Who among us is so eager to preserve the true apostolic doctrines of the faith handed down to us from generation to generation that they are willing to put their hand to the plow without looking back? Will you stand at the call of God and reply with Isaiah, *“Send me!”*?

The evidence of the last several decades would speak loudly against this. American Lutherans have become lax—and not just those *“other”* Lutherans either. A spiritual malaise has infected even our beloved synod. We have given ourselves over to every aberrant doctrine and religious fad that has come along. In many places, we have watered down our doctrines to the point that we no longer look nor confess like Lutherans at all. In others, we have done away with the apostolic teachings altogether, casting aside as unessential, the doctrine and practice of the faith once delivered unto us.

In recent years we Lutherans have acted as though we are just one more sect among the plethora of Christian sects—that we are not unique and have no more to offer the world than any other sect. For this, we must repent, for we have been given a marvelous gift, a great and mighty wonder, a full and holy cure. Yet, we continue to compete against other church bodies for members to fill the pews as though we are not the Church, but a corporation given to competition for a larger market share like MacDonald’s and Burger King or Ford and GM.

So we develop flashy programs and invent so-called *“ministries”* instead of preaching the Gospel of JESUS CHRIST. We preach to people’s felt needs instead of preaching the one thing needful. We remove *“Lutheran”* from our signs and become *“Community”* churches with catchy names offering pabulum instead of meat, and we throw away our precious doctrines for fear of offending so-called *“seekers”* and the unbelieving world. But the Gospel *is* an offense and *“foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*

Thus, a Lutheran should be deeply distressed to see our Church and faith destroyed when our doctrine and practice, when our teaching and worship, in so many of our Lutheran congregations, are no longer distinguishable from those faith bodies our Confessions actually reject and condemn. The *“ends justify the means”* we are told by those who have sold their Lutheran birthright for a pot of beans, but the *“ends justify the means”* is a weak excuse for leading poor souls down the wide road of destruction. We Lutherans must soon awaken and repent before our LORD chastises us as He chastised St. Peter: *“Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”*

And yet, in the end, this day is really not about what we may or may not have done. It is not about Martin Luther or the Lutheran Reformers, it is not even really about the anniversary of the Reformation; it is, and always will be, about the Gospel of JESUS CHRIST. For the Gospel of CHRIST *“is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’”* This is the gift our LORD gave to His Church, and it is the gift again brought to light through Father Martin Luther over 500 years ago.

Therefore, even as we witness what looks for all the world like the death of Christianity we may take heart. For even as this day is not about any one man or group of men, neither are we to fear for God’s Church. For it is God’s Church after all and He has promised to preserve for Himself a remnant against whom even the gates of hell shall not prevail. Even in the darkest of times CHRIST is LORD of the Church. Who has a god like unto our God? *“Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea”* (Introit).

*“For us fights the valiant One, Whom God Himself elected.  
Ask ye who is this? JESUS CHRIST it is,  
Of Sabaoth LORD, And there’s none other God;  
He holds the field forever.”*

(A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, The Lutheran Hymnal 262)

Know then that our LORD is faithful even when we are not. He is victorious even when we have been defeated. By the HOLY SPIRIT, He calls His Church back to the Gospel. The SPIRIT’S call is not violent. He uses no more force than our LORD’S Holy Word as He breathes it on the wind and into our ears, but this is more than enough. He brings salvation to us by GRACE ALONE, through FAITH ALONE, by SCRIPTURE ALONE, through CHRIST ALONE; SOLA GRATIA, SOLA FIDE, SOLA SCRIPTURA, SOLA CHRISTUS.

So it is, that we set this day aside and give praise to God whose mercy endures forever; Who has preserved His Word and His Church and brought us to remembrance that we are sinners yes, but sinners saved entirely by His grace, through faith; that we have been reconciled to the FATHER by the death of JESUS CHRIST, His SON and He is well pleased with us for His own sake, in perfect, unconditional, love, and bestows His blessing and favor upon us without price through His Word, in the waters of Holy Baptism, in His Holy Supper, and blessed and Holy Absolution.

Today we celebrate the preservation of the Gospel of JESUS CHRIST in a spirit of grateful humility, that God, for two-thousand years, has allowed His Church to preach the Good News of forgiveness in JESUS CHRIST, and we ask that He would continue to preserve His Church on earth for the sake of CHRIST so that many more might hear the pure doctrine that God forgives sinners all by grace through faith in JESUS CHRIST alone, even as we pray that He keeps us in the same. Today, and every day, we give thanks that by grace through faith alone we have received CHRIST's Word of Absolution, *"I forgive you all your sins."*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

✠ ✠ ✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠ ✠ ✠

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