

Pentecost 21 / Reformation Observed / October 25, 2020

Matthew 11:12

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”

Each year in October we observe the Sunday of the Reformation. Reformation Day is October 31st. On Halloween in 1517 Martin Luther famously posted his 95 theses on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany. His 95 theses were intended to stimulate a conversation within the Western Catholic Church, regarding teachings and practices in the church that seemed to be at variance with the scriptures. The bible was available to very few people before the invention of the printing press. Few possessed a bible. Few possessed the ability to read Latin. Bibles were only available in the Latin translation, known as the Vulgate. Translations in the language of the people were forbidden by the church and illegal in most Western European countries. The first authorized translation of the English Bible was the King James Version, published in England with royal assent in the 17th century.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, Greek manuscripts became more readily available to scholars such as Martin Luther. As they studied the New Testament in the original language, it became apparent that there were serious errors in the Latin translation. As they read the Greek New Testament, people like Luther came to question both the Latin translation and many of the teachings of the church, especially as they related to the salvation of human beings. Luther had been taught as a child and as an Augustinian Monk that salvation was something God gave to people who earned it through their piety, service to the church and acts of penitence. Luther joined a religious order, so that He could devote himself full time to ensuring his eternal salvation. He sought his assurance in obedience to the teachings of the law, as understood by the church and his religious order.

As a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, Luther was blessed to study the Scriptures. In his studies, he came to realize that salvation is not something we earn, deserve or in any way contribute to, but is a gift of God's grace for the sake of Jesus. One of the most enlightening passages was our New Testament text this morning, Romans 3:19-28. Luther as a monk tried to pursue salvation by works of the law. Verse 20 was an eye opener. It says, “By works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through law comes knowledge of sin.” Rather than a path to salvation, the law shows us our sin. The most astonishing passages from Luther's point of view were verses 23 and 24 which say, “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Luther was a very serious monk. He applied himself diligently to all the rules of his order. He surpassed many of his fellow monks in fasting, vigils and works of penance, but he felt the constant oppression of a guilty conscience. He never could do enough to satisfy the law of the church, let alone the law of God. He felt a weight of guilt lift from his conscience, when he realized that He received salvation as a gift of grace for the sake of Christ. The Sunday of the reformation is set aside to remember God's grace in Christ Jesus and to celebrate the salvation we receive from God as a free gift, through faith in Him.

When Luther realized that we are saved by grace, received through faith in Christ Jesus and that Jesus and His cross are the key to understanding scripture, it was as if a light went on in his soul. He was so excited that he wanted to share the good news with everyone; his parishioners, his students, his prince, his fellow monks, his bishop and even the pope. He thought everyone would be as happy as he was. Many of his parishioners, students and fellow monks were happy and felt the relief of the gospel in their souls. But not everyone was happy with his exposition of the scriptures and discovery of the gospel. The pope excommunicated him. The emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V, condemned him and commanded that he be arrested and brought in dead or alive. Many men and women who questioned the teachings of the church and who found comfort in the gospel of Jesus through the scriptures, were condemned and suffered violent deaths.

It was as Jesus said in our gospel this morning, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” Not everyone receives the good news of the gospel as good news. The gospel was a threat to the religious and political authorities of Jesus' time; as it was to the authorities in 16th century Europe. John the Baptist was opposed by the religious authorities of Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem, because he challenged their teaching. They taught salvation by obedience to the law. John called people to come to God with repentant hearts and to receive forgiveness as an act of His grace through faith.

John was opposed because, he called the religious authorities out for their sins, which had an appearance of righteousness, but were empty and hypocritical in the eyes of God, because they lacked faith and love for God.

John's fate was sealed when He called King Herod to confess his sin. It's always dangerous to call an absolute monarch to repent. Herod was a violent man and at his hands John the Baptist met a violent death; as did many of the prophets God sent before him, as did the apostles who came after him. All, except for John the Evangelist, suffered violent deaths for the sake of the gospel; even as Jesus suffered a violent death for the sake of the gospel to earn our salvation, which we receive as a gift of God's grace through faith.

Jesus came to bring the righteous reign of God into the world through the gospel of forgiveness, believed and proclaimed by the church. The Church is the kingdom of God on earth. The church is the gathering and fellowship of people in whose hearts God has begun to reign by His Spirit, through faith in Jesus. The first resistance to God's righteous reign comes from within believers, through our sinful nature that resists the working of the Holy Spirit. Believers are not saved by virtue of our inner goodness, or because we are lesser sinners than anyone else. We are saved, because the Holy Spirit overcomes the resistance of the sinful nature through the word; creates and sustains faith in our hearts. As believers we must constantly resist the unbelief and rebellion of the sinful nature, by turning to the word and by drowning our sinful nature daily in the water of our baptism, through repentance and faith in Jesus.

Jesus won the victory through His sinless life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. The victory is won, but we must battle against the sinful nature and its desires. Even as the religious and political authorities opposed Jesus, John the Baptist, the apostles and other faithful bible teachers like Martin Luther, our sinful nature opposes the gospel of grace in our hearts. We naturally think our good works deserve a reward, or in some way play a role in our salvation. We must remember that good works are God's gift at work in us and that we are saved by grace through faith, apart from works of the law. Our sinful nature resists the righteous desires of the Holy Spirit and spurs us to rebel against the will of God. In the letter to the Romans St. Paul spoke of the struggle every believer has with sin. He said, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my flesh...For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing...For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind." The struggle between the righteous reign of God and the reign of sin was so intense that he cried out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" The answer is Jesus.

Jesus won the victory. We battle against outward opposition and inner resistance by the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us. We battle against the enemies of faith using the weapons of the Spirit, most importantly, the word, which is the sword of the Spirit. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "Be strong in the Lord and His might." He says, "Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." We battle with the sword of the Holy Spirit. We overcome the resistance of our sinful nature and the opposition of the devil and the world, by the power of the blood of the Lamb. In the book of Revelation, John sees the church in heaven, victorious against the sinful nature, the devil and the world. He is told they have overcome "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Jesus won the victory by the blood of His cross. He gives us a share in His victory through faith in His Name! We stand on the firm foundation of His word that gives us forgiveness, strength and life!

The Sunday of the Reformation is a day to remember that the kingdom of heaven continues to suffer violence and that human and spiritual agencies seek to take it by force. It is a day to remember the things that stand against us from age to age; Sin, death and the devil. It's a day to remember that there will always be violence and resistance to the kingdom of God, from the world, the devil, our sinful nature and even from within the church.

Most importantly, it is a day to remember that Jesus stands with us and for us! It is a day to remember Jesus' victory over sin, death and the devil and that it is by His grace that we are saved. It is a day to remember the power and promise of God's word. As Martin Luther said in his famous Reformation hymn, 'A Mighty Fortress is our God,' "God's word forever shall abide no thanks to foes who fear it...For God Himself fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit...Though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The Kingdom's our forever." The kingdom is ours forever; now by faith, fully in the resurrection to life everlasting. In Jesus' Name. Amen