

Pentecost 23 / Reformation

October 31, 2021

Matthew 11:12-19

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

October 31st is the traditional date marking the beginning of the 16th century reformation of the church. October 31st was an important day in the calendar of the medieval church, because it was the eve of All Saints or All Souls Day. It was called “All Hallows Eve” from which we get Halloween. All souls or All Saints, was a day set apart to remember and give thanks for the countless souls who lived and died believing in Christ, but who were not so well known as to have a special day set aside for their remembrance. It was a day to remember that in Christ, all believers are saints, washed in baptism into His death and resurrection. Made holy by His blood that washes away our sins. Promised a place in heaven at death and a share in His resurrection when He returns and makes all things new.

Unfortunately, by the beginning of the 16th century that’s not how the day was perceived or observed. Over the course of the preceding centuries, much superstition was attached to All Saints Day and All Hallows Eve, in particular. They became seen as days of the dead, in which the souls of the dead roamed the earth, beseeching people to offer alms to the church to free them from punishment and allow them to enter heaven.

Superstition and fear were so prevalent in the minds of many people in the early 16th century that Jesus and His sacrifice were almost completely overlooked and forgotten. People sacrificed for their own sins by their service to the church, chastisement of their bodies or by devoting themselves to religious service. People sacrificed for their own sins and for the sins of others, by purchasing certificates that promised relief from suffering after death. Lots of certificates were sold on and around All Saints Day and All Hallows Eve. All Hallows Eve was the perfect Day for an Augustinian Monk, Martin Luther, to advance his thesis that salvation is a gift of God given freely to all who believe for the sake of the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross.

All Hallows Eve falls on a Sunday this year, but we observe Reformation Sunday every year, regardless of which day Halloween falls, so that we remember that salvation is the gift of God; given not because of our works or sacrifices; given, not purchase; given out of the heart of God’s love. Salvation is a free gift, offered for all to receive, given freely to all who believe. Salvation is a free gift, but it is a gift that was purchased at great cost. The salvation we freely receive was purchased by Jesus at the cost of His perfect life and sacrificial death for the forgiveness of our sins. St. John wrote in his third letter, *“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”* Salvation is a gift God desires all to receive. A gift received fully and freely by all who believe. As the Apostles declared in the first century at the beginning of the holy Christian church, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* As St. Paul said, *“There is no distinction for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”*

In our gospel this morning Jesus said, *“From the days of John the Baptizer until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force.”* The kingdom of heaven in the first centuries suffered violence from political forces that feared its growth; and also from people who sought to use its resources to spread and popularize their own ideas about God and religion. The kingdom of heaven suffered violence in the medieval period from internal forces, which twisted and distorted the gospel of God and turned the gift of grace into to a prize a person achieved, through her or his efforts and obedience. The kingdom of God continues to suffer violence in the same ways today; from external forces that threaten its existence and from internal forces that misunderstand, misinterpret and misrepresent the truth of the eternal gospel.

The kingdom of God is God’s righteous reign in the world, beginning in the human heart. The place of God’s reign first and foremost is in the hearts of individual believers. God reigns in righteousness in the human heart through the eternal gospel. The gospel is the good news of His love, expressed in many ways daily and in many ways throughout history, but expressed most fully and profoundly in giving Jesus into the world and onto the cross to be our Saviour. The gospel is eternal, because God is eternal and love is the essence of His being. God never required humans to sacrifice for sins. All sacrifices commanded by God for sins were reminders of His promise to forgive and pointed towards the great sacrifice He would offer in giving His Son into death, once and for all, for the atonement of human sin. The kingdom of God is resisted by the world, the devil and by our own

sinful nature. Despite inward resistance and outward opposition, the kingdom of God advances in the world and in the human heart, because God is the force of faith and His word has the power to accomplish what He desires in the human heart; our salvation in time and for eternity for the sake of Jesus.

There is nothing more amazing than the kingdom of God, His righteous reign in the world, beginning in the hearts of human beings. Over the scope of history nothing appeared to have less chance of surviving than God's kingdom, the holy church. In Old Testament times it was swallowed up by two great empires. Not only did it survive, it thrived and out lived those and other hostile governments. In Old Testament times it survived the inner defilement of faithlessness, as countless Israelites turned from the Living God to worship dead idols. The prophet Elijah thought at one point that he was the only believer left. But God always preserves His kingdom and gives it growth in the hearts of people, who by His power believe His promises. As God said to Isaiah before His kingdom was about to be swallowed up by the Babylonians, *"The word that goes forth from my mouth will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I send it."*

God's purpose is the salvation of the human soul. He sent His word Jesus, through whom He created and in whom He upholds all things, to be our Saviour. He certainly experienced opposition. He seemed to have been defeated. But Jesus darkest moment was actually the moment He won the victory; not for Himself, but for us and for all believers. The New Testament Church has never been short on hardships and threats, internally and externally. But the greatest threats have not come from external persecution from hostile governments. The greatest threat has always come from false teachings and misrepresentations of the eternal gospel. The world and the devil can only harm and kill the body; false gospels kill the soul. All false gospels lead us away from Jesus, to ourselves as the source of relationship with God and salvation. The true and eternal gospel leads us to God as the source of salvation and to Jesus as the means by which we come to God. The true gospel is that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life; through Him, through faith in Him alone, we live with God in peace in time; come into His presence at death; and will dwell with Him forever in the resurrection to life everlasting.

The Sunday of the Reformation is not about people, places or historical events. It is about the gospel of Jesus and the kingdom God creates in the human soul, as He conquers human hearts with repentance and heals them with forgiveness. The Sunday of the Reformation is the good news of God's love in giving Jesus to share in our humanness, give His life for our sins on the cross and rising to life for our justification. The Sunday of the Reformation is the good news that God justifies us for the sake of Christ; that despite our sins and sinfulness, He forgives us and declares us not guilty. The Sunday of the Reformation is the good news that despite our struggle with sin, the hostility of the world and the devil, that God will continue to extend His reign in our hearts and throughout the world. God will accomplish His good purpose in Jesus Christ to bring about the renewal of heaven and earth as the home of righteousness. God will bring us and all who now live under His righteous reign to the fullness of glory at the return of Jesus and the recreation of heaven and earth, the home of righteousness.

God bless us with His grace, continue to extend His reign in our hearts and His kingdom in the world through the gospel, until Jesus returns and reigns as King over all. In His Name. Amen