

Festival of the Reformation (observed)
St. Matthew 11:12-19

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”

The kingdom of heaven suffers violence as the violent take it by force. However, as you read the Gospel accounts, there appears to be little in the way of violence with regard to what the kingdom of heaven suffers or how it is taken. Jesus walks on earth and is relatively unscathed only until He allows Himself to be captured, beaten, and crucified. Until Jesus’ time had come, there were only those who sought to stone Him and throw Him over the cliff, but failed—no account of a scraped knee, lacerated members, broken bones, bloody nose, or black eye; no account of battles and wars. Jesus walks around and teaches wherever He goes, healing the infirm, raising the dead to life, and forgiving the sins of the people.

Where was the kingdom of heaven suffering violence? How were the violent taking it by force?

Dear listeners, let me remind you of the Pharisees. Those upright, moral men who taught the people that the way into the kingdom of heaven involved following their rules. Oh, the Law of God was well and good—God laid down some pretty good guidelines in order to achieve His will—but if you wanted to be sure of your salvation, if you wanted to be sure of your place in the kingdom of heaven, you had to abide to the rules accepted by the Pharisees. Recall, if you will, the ritual hand-washing that the Pharisees complained that Jesus’ disciples didn’t abide by. (cf. Mark 7:2-8) To the Pharisees, Jesus’ disciples did not have a place in the kingdom of heaven because they failed to keep the tradition of the elders. Just about everywhere He went, Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees, simply because He didn’t hold to their doctrines.

You see, the Pharisees were a group of men who sought to “wrest the kingdom from the Son,” as Martin Luther put it in his quintessential Reformation hymn. Their wresting, by all appearances, did not appear violent. It was merely words—rules they had put in place over and above the Law of God, many of which were put in place due to a false understanding of the Word of God. But, as the kingdom of heaven is established and kept by the Word of God, any word of man superposed over the Word of God is a violent act. It shows an utter lack of knowledge and respect for God and His Word. It states that God’s Word is not good enough; it states that Jesus isn’t the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It sets up a kingdom in opposition to the kingdom of heaven. And, as there are those who would fall victim to this kingdom of opposition—by threat of the force of damnation according to their rules—they cause the kingdom of heaven to suffer violence by false teaching.

Throughout history, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence in this fashion, as the violent sought to take it by force. Heresy after heresy arose, to be condemned by one church council after another. From the denial of the effectiveness and worthiness of the Law of God to the denial of the Trinity, from the denial of the person-hood of Christ to the denial of the divinity of Jesus, from the denial of the complete and total effectiveness of the death of Jesus Christ for salvation to the denial of the reality of the physical world—one after another the violent sought to override the clear teaching of the Word of God—of the doctrine of salvation by Jesus Christ—with man-made thoughts, traditions, teachings, and rules.

Many of these heretics would confess that their desire was not to visit violence upon the kingdom of heaven, but to reveal further the kingdom of heaven to man, even confessing a faith in Jesus. As a seminary professor once quipped in class, no Christian ever woke up and decided to be a heretic that day. They would not admit to being violent—their intentions were good and peaceful, they

would probably say—but their teachings would prove to be violence when compared to and superposed over the Word of God.

How appropriate that this text would be used for the Festival of the Reformation. If you take a look at the history of the Lutheran church, you must look at the church of the papacy from which it sprang. At the time of Luther, the church had been seized by force. Her bishops and presbyters, elders and overseers were ignorant of the Bible and the teachings of the Word of God, so that the Jesus they taught and confessed was not the Jesus of the Scriptures. If you don't know that upon which you claim to stand, you are doomed to fall.

Ignorance of the Word of God is an open door for all kinds of false teaching. The violence that the kingdom of heaven suffered in the time of Luther was a teaching of works righteousness. One cannot discount the greed at the earthly top of the church, as the papacy sought to raise funds for the building of a majestic basilica. So, indulgences were sold, and with them the teaching that by these certificates, one merits eternal life in paradise.

Sadly, the errors of the church didn't end there. The ignorance of the Word of God was evident in that, while the words of free forgiveness for Jesus Christ's sake were read, they were not understood and unknown. Monastic orders were established, and membership in them was considered a holier work than keeping the entire Law of God (sounds almost Pharisaic, doesn't it?). Praying to God was practically forbidden—He was too distant and angry to be approached directly, so the church taught that her members could approach the saints and rely on their intercession. Chief among the saints was Mary, Mother of Jesus, who was given a throne in heaven by the church and called Queen, so the church had elevated her to a position over her Son by whom man has redemption, the forgiveness of sins!

It is in this sorry state of the church that the Lutheran Church has its origin as an Augustinian friar wrestled with the fact of his own sinfulness and the agony and violence he suffered as he tried to reconcile this with that distant, angry, and holy God. He felt no holier than the ordinary church member, even though he was a monk—He saw his own unworthiness before God, the "Queen of Heaven," and Jesus Christ. A book based on a bio-pic records these words of the monk's teacher, Johannes von Staupitz,

Martin, don't you remember the Apostles' Creed? Don't you know that it shows that God loved you enough to send His Son to save you? Haven't you often said, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins"? Martin, don't torture yourself with your sins. Throw yourself into the Savior's arms—the Savior who died for you.

If not for his simple words, recorded in history books, "Search the Scriptures, Martin," where would the church be today? God only knows.

Luther did search the Scriptures. His eyes were opened to the mercy and grace of God, found in the Son of God, Jesus the Christ. He saw that true honor and veneration of Mary was to call her blessed to be the one who bore God, through whom God deigned to take on flesh, dwell with man, and die for their sins (venerating the virgin and her blessedness spoke more to Jesus than to Mary). By this, he learned of the closeness of God—that He is near with grace and mercy and every blessing, supplying all his needs, and ready to forgive for the sake of His Son. He discovered that all vocations are God-given, and not one is holier than another.

From Luther's searching of the Scriptures come have the three *Solas*: *Sola gratia*, *Sola fide*, *Sola scriptura*—grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. You are saved by grace alone, received by faith alone, revealed by Scripture alone. This has long been the true teaching of the church, lost over time as the violent had sought to take the kingdom of heaven by the violence of false teaching, and God again revealed His Word to the church.

So, what about today?

For one thing, the church of the papacy still stands, still teaching many of the same false doctrines (though they have softened some): that man has a place in the work for his own salvation, that the monastic life is a high, holy life, that God is distant and full of wrath, that man must rely on the intercession of the saints.

There's also the other side: the descendants of those who ran wild and rampant with what the Reformation brought—these church bodies which tend to be lumped together with other confessions under the label "Protestant," but I am speaking primarily of those who hold to the teachings of men like Zwingli, Arminius, Menno, and the like. Strangely, while they have largely divested themselves of much or all of the ritual of their papal ancestry, their teachings echo those of the church of the papacy: that man has a place in the work for his own salvation, that a life dedicated in service to the church is greater than "ordinary" vocations, that dead relatives have their angelic wings and are "looking down on us from above," as if to be of service to those on earth, if also not others.

There are also others who claim the title Christian who have otherwise abandoned many of the core tenets of Christianity, supplanting them with man-made doctrines and false translations. Chief among this group are the Latter Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses. I dare mention, also, a group cited as a Christian heresy in Article I of the Augsburg Confession: Muslims, who recognize Jesus as a great prophet, but that the Word of God is a corrupted tome.

Even to this day, it is evident that the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men.

But, as with all things false doctrine or sinful, you need not look outside of yourselves, outside of your circles, to find the kingdom of heaven suffering violence. If by Romans 7 you learn that you are at the same time sinner and saint—*simul justus et peccator*, a tenet of the Reformation—then you must agree that there is a war within yourselves between your old man and the new. You see at work in your own reason, senses, and members the violence that attempts to wrest away the kingdom of heaven. At times you succumb to the false doctrines with which the Pharisees, the heretics, the papacy, and others plagued the church. You see the law of sin at work—you must confess that you are a poor miserable sinner, if by Romans 7 you learn that you are at the same time sinner and saint.

However, you should not discount the fact that you are a saint. Further, one cannot deny that saints inhabit the church of the papacy and those of the Protestants. What does this mean? It means that God is near to you with mercy and grace. It means that you are saved by grace through faith in the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; who descended into hell, and on the third day rose again from the dead; who ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, the Father almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. This you confess, right along with Martin Luther who was reminded of His confession of the belief in the forgiveness of sins. And this is just as true for the faithful among the Papists and Protestants.

This is the full teaching of the Word of God, which is rightly divided into two parts: the Law and the Gospel—a doctrine rediscovered in the Reformation. By the Law you learn what you ought to do, and that you do not do it. The Law shows you your sin and need for a savior. The Gospel is God's grace; it shows you—nay, gives to you—the Savior you need, as demonstrated by the Law. The Gospel gives you the Savior who has done all the work necessary that you may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. It is as has been said many times around here, even as you heard in last week's sermon, "The Law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done; grace says, 'Believe in this,' and everything is already done."

What does grace invite you to believe? What does grace give you the faith to believe? Grace gives you the faith to believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and

also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is your Lord, who has redeemed you, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won you from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. Believe in Jesus, says grace, for He has done all of the work for your salvation!

Grace teaches you that while the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, even within your own reason, senses, and members, that while the violent take it by force by placing their word in opposition to the Word of God, the Word of the Lord remains forever—*Verbum Domini manet in aeternum*, yet another tenet of the Reformation—while their words, their doctrines and tradition, will wither and fail.

It is the eternally enduring Word of God that tells you that you have the kingdom of heaven, that you are in the kingdom of heaven for Jesus' sake, no matter what may come. Or, as Martin Luther penned in that quintessential hymn:

The Word they still shall let remain
Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plan
With His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

Therefore, if the kingdom yours remaineth, despite the violence it suffers in order to be taken away from you, from without and within, then this grace of God, which the eternally enduring Word of God declares to you is true: for Jesus' sake, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.