

October 30, 2022
Festival of the Reformation

The Lessons:

Revelation 14:6-7

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19-28

Matthew 11:12-19

The Hymns:

656 *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*

555 *Salvation Unto Us Has Come*

655 *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word*

The Collect:

Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:

The Word Forever Shall Remain

Festival of the Reformation.

Matthew 11:12-19

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 11: "Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." This is the Word of the Lord.

I. Anything But the Gospel

One day a couple of teenage boys had this conversation:

"What do you wanna do?"

"I don't know.

What do you wanna do?"

"I dunno. What do you wanna do?"

"We could do this."

"Uh...nah. I don't wanna do that."

"How 'bout this?"

"No, I don't really wanna do that, either."

"Huh. I guess there's nothing to do."

It's one of the most mind-numbingly tedious and irritating conversations to be involved in, especially when you're the one suggesting things to do, and the other person is focused on wanting to do none of them. There are some times when people are more interested in having a problem than finding the solution to the problem. Jesus sums it up at the level of children with the saying, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." In other words, there were

kids who said they wanted to do something, anything; but when their playmates said, “Let’s dance,” they didn’t want to—they weren’t in the mood to be happy. So when the friends said, “Let’s be sober and sing a dirge,” they didn’t want to do that either. They just weren’t in the mood for a solution.

But Jesus isn’t talking about games around the marketplace: He’s talking about how His hearers regard salvation. They want a Savior, but they just don’t want the kind of Savior that He is. They don’t want the message that He proclaims; and, in fact, they’d like Him to change the message to suit them.

The background to these verses helps. Jesus has just been talking about John the Baptist. When John the Baptist preached he had a pretty austere lifestyle. He lived in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey. He was the second Elijah, pointing the way to the Savior. He didn’t indulge in feasting or enjoy a drink now and then. He was all business—he had a tough, disciplined lifestyle. Crowds went out to hear him preach, and many were baptized in the Jordan River. And what was John’s message? He preached repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He declared to the people that they couldn’t save themselves by their own righteousness.

While many believed, many didn’t like the sound of that at all. Now, John’s teaching was entirely Scriptural, so it was a little tough to reject him on the basis of his preaching. They needed another reason to turn away, so what was their response? Impeach the messenger! “Hey, any guy who lives in the sticks wearing camel’s hair has gotta be a little off. He might even have a demon to be acting the way he is! You don’t want to be getting your guidance from demon-possessed oddballs, do you?”

Jesus came shortly thereafter, just as John had foretold. In fact, John had the privilege of identifying Jesus as the Savior, as pointing Him out in the crowd and declaring, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Although Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb on His way to the cross, He didn’t have the same austere life as John. He went to parties and weddings—in fact, His first miracle in John is turning water into wine to keep the feast going! Scripture records Him at countless dinners with all sorts of people, both Pharisees and tax collectors.

So it would stand to reason that if you didn’t like John with his simple lifestyle, then you’d probably find Jesus’ way more attractive. Yet, while many believed Jesus, He was rejected by the same people who rejected John. The same ones who would say, “Don’t listen to John because he’s so austere that he must be demon-possessed” would also say, “Don’t listen to Jesus because He’s not austere, because He eats and drinks wine! He must be a glutton and a drunkard, and He eats with tax collectors and sinners! In fact, we think He’s demon-possessed, too.”

How could they reject both John and Jesus for completely opposite lifestyles? It was because both had the same message. Both preached repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Both proclaimed that man couldn’t save himself by his own works. Both proclaimed that Jesus was the Lamb of God, the Savior who would sacrifice Himself for the sins of the world. That was the message that His enemies just couldn’t take, because it required them to deny themselves, confess their sin and trust in Him.

So the strategy was clear: if you can’t impeach the message, impeach the messenger. Jesus came as the Savior of all, and those who opposed Him—like the upstanding, religious Pharisees—declared Him a glutton and a drunk. Elsewhere, they said that Jesus must have a demon (Matthew 10:25), just like they’d called John demon-possessed. But that wasn’t enough: the sinful nature can’t stand the

Gospel, because it knows that the Gospel is the death of sin and death. It's not enough to bad-mouth the Gospel: ultimately, sinners who reject it have to get rid of it. What happened to John the Baptist? Beheaded by Herod for warning him of his adultery. And what of Jesus? You know: the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered false witnesses, put Him on trial and convinced Pilate to have Him crucified. Don't underestimate sin's hatred for grace: it would rather take life—even your own—than have you hear the Gospel. This is what Jesus speaks of at the opening of our text: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force." He declared that the people of God would face opposition—even violence—for faithfully speaking the Gospel.

And then, at the end of the text, Jesus declared, "Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." True wisdom is proven by what it produces. The wisdom of God is Christ and His Gospel, and that Gospel is the power of salvation to all who believe. If a man who eats locusts declares the Gospel in the wilderness, it is God's powerful saving Word even if people call him demon-possessed. If a man speaks the Gospel at a banquet, it is God's powerful saving Word even if people call Him a glutton and a drunkard. (In fact, if an actual demon-possessed, gluttonous drunkard were to speak the Gospel, it would still be God's saving Word!)

Wisdom is justified by her deeds. Don't fall for the devil's trick of doubting the message because of what the world says about the messenger—whether the messenger is the pastor, the Church or the individual Christian. The measure of the message is whether or not it is the Word of God.

2. The Wisdom of God through the Ages

Today is the Festival of the Reformation. Normally, our festival days celebrate events that happen within the Bible, but today we commemorate a day in church history that took place nearly 15 centuries after the resurrection of Jesus. It is still an important one, so much so that some have suggested that the angel in our epistle for this day (Revelation 14:6-7) is none other than Martin Luther, messenger of God. Whether or not that's true, we cannot say for sure. But we dare not downplay the Lord's use of Luther in His will that the Gospel be preached to all nations. The Gospel was, for all intents and purposes, lost by 1500. The Church had slowly changed its doctrine until it taught that Jesus was the angry Son of God, and that your only way to salvation was by doing enough good works to make up for your sin.

This was the teaching in which Luther grew up, and even as a monk he grew to hate God: for, as he was taught, he believed that God required him to keep a Law he couldn't keep in order to be saved.

What Luther rediscovered from Scripture was earth-shaking: while it was true that he deserved God's judgment for not keeping God's Law, it was also true that Jesus had died on the cross in his place, for his sin. Furthermore, it was true that the forgiveness that Jesus had won on the cross was a free gift to all— along with the faith to believe it.

In other words, Luther rediscovered the Gospel, the Gospel which the institution called the church had all but lost. He then did what any Christian would do: within His calling as a pastor and professor, He notified the church of the truth by means of posting his 95 theses. He desired that the church reform, abandon its false teaching of saving yourself by works, and return to the joyous proclamation

that Christ had died for the sins of the world. In other words, he preached repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

And how did Luther's superiors in the church respond? They branded him a glutton and a drunkard, a wild boar and a servant of Satan. If that wasn't enough, they also arranged with the powers that be to have him killed...if they could catch him. But the Lord preserved his life for many more years, so that his work in the Reformation might continue.

Make no mistake: the powers-that-be wanted Luther dead for declaring that salvation was free for the sake of Jesus. They wanted him gone for proclaiming the Gospel. See, from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

But wisdom is justified by her deeds. And the Lord has declared that this wisdom of salvation, the Gospel, will be preached until He returns in glory.

You and I don't live in times where violence is directed against us for speaking the Gospel. At least, that is true in our nation. There are plenty of Christians around the world who face persecution and death for speaking eternal life in Christ to others. Here and now, though, we enjoy this great and historically-rare privilege of gathering here on Sunday morning, free from the fear of state persecution or violent mobs surrounding us outside. It is good for us to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, and it is good for us to give thanks for the peace that the Lord provides for us here. Aside from the current name-calling that we must endure for faithfulness to the Word, we have it pretty easy at the moment.

However, it is still a time that requires vigilance, for it is in times of peace and prosperity that the Church is most likely to lose the Gospel. This makes sense: when death is a daily threat, you want to cling to the eternal life that Christ has won. When peace and prosperity prevail, salvation seems less important and Christians tend to get distracted. The proclamation of forgiveness is less satisfying when we're not acutely aware of death's shadow or God's wrath. That is when the Church starts to stray, to make the faith about improving and enjoying life here, or to compromise and declare sin and false teaching to be okay. The devil, the world and our own sinful flesh is happy to nudge this along, because all three of these hate the Gospel like nothing else. It's only when we understand the consequence of our sin and the reality of death that we are thirsty for the Gospel.

So remember Jesus' words: wisdom is justified by her deeds. Only Christ and Him crucified is the wisdom of God, and only your crucified and eternal Lord has grace and forgiveness for you. Don't measure the wisdom of this message by its reputation in the world: the world will always declare that the Church is at best useless and at worst the source of all evil as long as it proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ. Don't measure the wisdom of the Gospel by the preacher. Preachers come and preachers go. Some might eat locusts and some might spend a lot of time at the buffet with tax collectors and sinners. But the measure of the messenger is the message—the measure of the preacher is whether or not he preaches to you the Word of God.

Congregations will vary in size, appearance and energy levels. But the measure of the congregation is its confession of faith, what it believes and declares. If it declares the wisdom of God, Christ and Him crucified, that is the place to be. That wisdom is justified by its works, for it works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe.

The Law for the day is this: wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, your sinful flesh will be working hard to impeach the message. It will work hard to close your ears to the Gospel by attacking the messenger who preaches it, or the foibles of others in the congregation. A lot of people have left the faith because somebody at church rubbed them the wrong way, and that was a good enough reason for them to stop receiving grace. If that is the case, they could regret doing so for eternity. Take care that you do not cause others so to stumble; and take care that you do not thus stumble yourselves. Stick to the message, for that is the wisdom of God.

Here is the Gospel for you on this Reformation Day: the Gospel is for you. You have been rescued from the generation that does not want to confess “Jesus is Lord.” By the grace of God, you hear the Gospel and believe what it says. You hear that Christ has died for your sins, and He is risen again for your justification. You know that He made you to be His own in your Baptism. He feeds you with His body and blood this day for the forgiveness of your sins. In a dark and violent world, the Lord Himself has made you wise unto salvation, counts you among His redeemed, beloved children. For this wisdom continues to go forth in the darkness, from the cross through the means of grace to you.

God’s Word forever shall remain, no thanks to foes who fear it. He’s by our side upon the plain—present with us—in, with and under those weapons of the Spirit, His means of grace—that for the sake of Jesus, you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.