

The Festival of the Reformation of the Church
St. Matthew 11:12-15
October 31st, 2017
Sts. Peter and Paul Ev. Lutheran Church
Greenville, SC
Pastor Jerald Dulas

The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence

In Nomine Iesu!

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

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

O Lord, send out Thy Light and Thy Truth, let them lead us. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. O Lord, graciously preserve me, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. On this date in 1517 the Blessed Dr. Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the castle church in order to begin debate on some abuses within the Church which he had noticed. That was 500 years ago. And, this event begins a series of 500th anniversary events; all of which will be celebrated in this century. In 2021 we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Diet of Worms, where Martin Luther declared that he could not recant his writings, for which he was excommunicated from the Roman church. In 2030 we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession, which establishes what we believe, teach and confess as a Christian Church. Then in 2080 we will celebrate (or more precisely our children and grandchildren will celebrate) the 500th anniversary of the Book of Concord, wherein all of the teachings of our Lutheran church are confessed. So then, over the course of these years we will have the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of our Lutheran forefathers, and understand not only the timeframe in which these events happened, hear of the persecution and violence which they suffered to bring the Gospel of our Lord + Jesus Christ into our ears.

The Evangelist St. Matthew in his Gospel records the words of our Lord + Jesus Who proclaims, "The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." Our Lord + Jesus is not talking about the violence that happens to believers in Christ who live in godless countries and societies. No! Our Lord is referring to the violent people within the Church, who cause the Kingdom of Heaven to suffer violence.

In our Lord's day it was the religious leaders—the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees—who took the comfort of the Gospel away from the people. Those who were labeled as "sinners" were outcasts and not worthy of the synagogue. They even lay the accusation against our Lord that "He eats and drinks with sinners." The scribes and Pharisees were trying to associate our Lord with sinners. Their purpose was to get the Lord + Jesus booted from the synagogue. The reasoning was that if He associates with sinners, then He is a sinner. But, our Lord has the right answer. He is a Physician treating the sick. The sick need a doctor. The sinner needs a Savior. He is their Savior, Who heals their souls with the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins. He is still our doctor, interceding to the Father on our behalf in Heaven and granting us forgiveness through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments.

The Early Church also experienced the violence of those within the Church who would seek to destroy the teachings of the Church, when many false teachers rose up within their midst. These heretics were condemned. There were many variations, but the heretics and false teachers in the Early Church can be broken down into two basic groups: those who taught falsely concerning the Godhead, and those who taught falsely regarding the two natures of Christ in His person. We enjoy the knowledge that these men were false teachers, and that they were rejected by the faithful preachers of the Word in their time. However, at the time there was much violence placed upon the Church and those faithful to the truth of the Word of God. Faithful preachers were removed from their pulpits and replaced with false teachers. The faithful preacher being led into exile away from the parish to which he had been called all because those in authority were led astray by false teaching. The ones who suffered the most were people of God, who were subjected to whatever false teacher was placed over them.

Eventually the truth was established by the grace of God at the gathering of all the bishops in the Ecumenical councils where the false teachers were refuted and the confession of the truth, which we have in the Nicene Creed, was established. The Lord God preserved His Church even in the midst of its violence and persecution against her.

But, it did not last, for then the devil attacked the Church in another fashion: by getting people to teach and believe that we are saved by our keeping of the Law; by teaching that we had to merit forgiveness of sins by doing works. Repentance was not about turning to our Lord + Jesus Christ as the Mediator and Redeemer of mankind from sin in faith, but was about fulfilling a prescribed number of tasks (like saying so many Hail Marys or Our Fathers) that was supposed to mean you were forgiven. Even entrance into Heaven was put on the market. For a certain amount of money, one could buy themselves (and their loved ones) out of the waiting room of Heaven, which was called Purgatory.

When Martin Luther and the other Reformers came along and challenged these unscriptural practices and teachings, they were met with violence and persecution. The devil was scowling as fierce as he could. Martin Luther was excommunicated from the Roman church, several pastors who preached and taught the things that Luther taught were hunted down and martyred, and again it was the people in the Church that suffered. For the Roman Church tried to take back by force the subjection under their false teaching that we are justified by our works, and tried to destroy the Gospel for those who desired to cling to it.

The Lutherans were eventually allowed to live and teach the true doctrine in peace. By the grace of God, the Gospel and the Lutheran church grew. The Lord God once again preserved His Church and His Bride, not allowing the devil and his minions to destroy the Church. The Church was instead strengthened in her faith and their reliance upon the One, True Savior of mankind—the Lord + Jesus Christ.

The violence against the Gospel occurred just after the 100th anniversary of Luther nailing the 95 theses to the Wittenberg castle church door. In fact, the violence took the form of a war—the Thirty Years War. Roman Catholic forces tried to subject the Lutherans to their false doctrine once more by war and bloodshed. Many lives were lost. But in the end, the Gospel was preserved by the grace of God. Even in the midst of war the Lutheran church enjoyed its golden age of orthodoxy. Besides the time of the Reformation, most of the good, Lutheran hymns are from that period, and we sing many of them in our parish. These hymns proclaim the good things that our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ has done for us: that He has come down out of Heaven and clothed Himself with our flesh, and fulfilled the Law perfectly for us, and has suffered and died in our place on the tree of the holy cross. He has done all this purely out of His love and His grace for us. We do not earn it, nor merit it, but it is a free gift. He justifies us by faith; our faith in our Lord + Jesus Christ, which He gives through the work of the Holy Ghost through the means of grace.

However, about another hundred years after the Thirty Years War, the Lutheran church again suffered violence at the hands of pietism and rationalism. Unfortunately, this attack against the Gospel came from within the Lutheran church. It was no longer outside forces trying to destroy the Gospel, but our forefathers tried to destroy it themselves. But in spite of this, the flame of the Gospel of our Lord + Jesus Christ was not extinguished, and that flame grew into a fire in the last half of the nineteenth century when a new age of confessionalism pushed back against the tide of pietism and rationalism. Many things in the Lutheran church that had been done away with during the previous age, once again saw its use being restored: the use of the liturgy, chanting in the churches, the use of vestments, things which we still try to cling onto today.

For, we are once more in a time when there is violence done to the Gospel among Lutherans. There are those who confuse the atonement and justification, teaching that mankind is universally justified—that is, made right with God—apart from faith, and that there are justified sinners in Hell. Our Lord + Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of the whole world, but mankind is justified by faith alone. This faith is gifted to us through the work of the Holy Ghost in the means of grace. This faith clings to the cross of our Lord + Jesus Christ, and the works which He has done for us to pay for our salvation and the salvation of all mankind.

There are also those who call themselves Lutheran who teach false doctrine: they deny the six-day creation, and call the narrative of Jonah an allegory, they deny that God's Word is indeed His Word given to us by the Holy Ghost through the writing of the Apostles and Prophets. They deny that certain sins are sins; openly supporting abortion and homosexuality. These have forsaken not only the Lutheran church, but the Christian church.

So here we are today. A small band of brothers. Our enemies, the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh, have waged war against all that is holy; they have waged war against the truth of God's Word, and have driven many away from the true Church. We may feel defeated by this. We may look around and see how small we are, and think that we are losing. But, my dear friends, nothing could be further from the truth. For we have here in our midst the Word of God preached in its purity, and the Sacraments administered according to Christ's institution. Our Lord + Jesus Christ has promised that He would be here in our midst wherever two or three gathers in His Name. And we are more than just two or three.

We may feel the violence against us. We may endure persecution, but hear what our Lord + Jesus says in the Gospel, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." These persecutions—this violence against the truth and against our Lord + Jesus—has been going on ever since St. John the Baptist began his ministry of preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is the same message which we preach today: turn to the Lord + Jesus to receive forgiveness, life and salvation. It is still under attack. But, in the same way that our Lord + Jesus Christ has preserved the Church throughout the centuries, especially the last 500 years, He will continue to preserve His Church for the next 500 years, or until He comes again to take all of us who believe on Him and cling to Him in faith to our eternal home in Heaven. In the Name of our Lord + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give glory! I will extol Thee, O Lord, and I will praise Thy Name forever and ever. Amen.

The Votum:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.