

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.

It's what I call the quintessential hymn of the Reformation, even though it was written some 24 years after Luther posted 95 Theses on the Wittenberg church door. It speaks volumes about what the Reformation was all about: The Word of God, God shielding His people from forces opposed to the Gospel, being kept in faith until death, and salvation by grace through faith alone. Today's translation leaves out some more politically incorrect verbiage, but that does not make Luther's original any less true, even today. Sadly, many Lutherans push this one aside for an earlier Luther hymn, which is pulled out in all of its glory on this day and sung with militant, Lutheran gusto.

The first hymn is the one you just sung. The second will be the next hymn you sing. But that first one, *Lord Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word*, says everything you want to say as a Lutheran, just in the title alone! And it's one that, especially in its original form, many others in Christendom might shy away from. The second hymn, *A Might Fortress is Our God*, while Lutheran in origin, and with a fantastic message all its own, can be found in many hymnals that are not Lutheran, even in Roman Catholic parishes. Our Roman brethren would be hard pressed to use that first hymn, especially in its original form, or something closer to it translated also by Catherine Winkworth:

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| 1. | Lord, keep us in Thy Word and work,
Restrain the murd'rous Pope and Turk,
Who fain would tear from off Thy throne
Christ Jesus, Thy beloved Son. | 4. | Destroy their counsels, Lord our God,
And smite them with an iron rod,
And let them fall into the snare
Which for Thy Christians they prepare. |
| 2. | Lord Jesus Christ, Thy power make known,
For Thou art Lord of lords alone;
Shield Thy poor Christendom, that we
May evermore sing praise to Thee. | 5. | So that at last they may perceive
That Lord our God, Thou still dost live,
And dost deliver mightily
All those who put their trust in Thee. |
| 3. | Thou Comforter of priceless worth
Give one mind to Thy flock on earth;
Stand by us in our final strife,
And lead us out of death to life. | | |

There is a reason, though, outside of celebrating the Festival of the Reformation today, that that hymn, as we have it in our hymnal, was sung as today's sermon hymn. "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." Luther saw that violence, firsthand, from within and without. That's why he wrote about the murderous Pope and Turk.

Any recollection of the life of Luther recounts the violence he and his "little movement" had to endure from the papacy. For teaching the doctrine of Scripture, and not supplanting the traditions of man as church doctrine (cf. Matthew 15:9), he was threatened with excommunication, was excommunicated, had a bounty on his head, and was either adored and revered by the masses or denounced as a heretic.

What isn't as well-known is that at the time of the Reformation, and for years following the posting of the 95 Theses, Turkish Muslims were encroaching on Europe. Eastern Europe was under siege. Even parts of Italy were under threat of Muslim conquest. It had just been 25 years since the Iberian peninsula—Spain and Portugal—had been reconquered after the Christian Visigoths there were conquered by the Moors more than 6 centuries previous.

The truth of the Gospel was under attack from the Pope. Christendom was under siege by the Turk. "Restrain the murderous Pope and Turk," Luther prayerfully wrote in the hymn.

It's the same prayer you can echo, even today. The kingdom of heaven suffers violence still today. That violence comes from within and without. The Pope and Turk are still murderous in their own ways. Add to that the murderous efforts of modern evangelicals and humanism, and the kingdom is suffering violence from all sides. It makes the more general and vague revision and translation you sang all the more appropriate: "Curb those who fain by craft and sword would wrest the Kingdom from Thy Son..."

Murderous...not all of these enemies of Christ take the life of His people. The Turks—or their modern descendants—still do as Christians near the land of Christ lose their heads for confessing Christ. Today's Pope doesn't take the life of Christians, or those who oppose the Roman Church, but He still sits on the throne of that church passing down doctrines contrary to those found in Scripture, murdering the faith of his followers and endangering their eternal lives. The same can be said of modern evangelicals, even though the letter of their doctrines is in the "opposite direction" of the Roman doctrine, still in spirit, they both go down the same road—works righteousness, that you must do something to earn God's favor and grace, that you somehow must make a decision to be a son of God. And those of the humanistic tradition—often referred to as atheists—decry anything religious and ridicule as fools anyone who confesses a faith in any god.

Murderous...these groups may or may not take your life, but their constant attacks against your brethren and against you have a way at chipping away at your faith. If there is so much opposition to Christendom and the kingdom of God, if there is so much hostility to the profession of the truth, it can make you wonder if it is really the truth that you confess? These acting against you can violently take your life—your eternal life—from you, though they cannot snatch it from you without your doing. In other words, they may attack you from every angle, and seek to convince you that your faith is false, but they cannot make you renounce your faith—that is all on you. But what they do—these treacherous murderers—is enough to give you reason to do so.

They have an ally: you. As much as these forces outside of yourself seek to have you deny the kingdom and wrest it from you, you are just as much, if not more, your own enemy. You each have within you the desire to "be your own man." We call it the Old Adam. It is that sinful nature which places your own fleshly desires above those that your Father in heaven has for you. It is that still-small voice you hear, not from someone else, but in your own head, that tells you that God is not real, that God didn't really say what you read in the Scriptures or hear from the pulpit, and that the only god you need to please is yourself.

But even this can be used as proof for the truth of the Gospel. You see, even St. Paul, that treacherous murderer of the Church turned Apostle, wrote of this struggle within himself.

[W]e know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:14-25)

From Romans 7 you learn one of the fundamental teachings of the Reformation: *simul iustus et peccator*—at the same time saint and sinner. The good that you want to do is to remain steadfast in the Word and work of God, but you are brought into captivity by your carnal nature to deny the Word and work of God.

Who can save you from this body of death, from this carnal nature? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ your Lord! It is Jesus Christ who has taken on flesh of your flesh and bone of your bone and suffered the full wrath and punishment for your sin. Jesus bore the full blow of the wrath of the Father for you so that you would be saved and forgiven. His blood is your propitiation, painted on the beams of the cross, with which you are marked on forehead and breast, so that death now passes you over.

You have sinned and continue to sin so long as you remain a part of this side of eternity. For it, every little bit of it and every last bit of it, you deserve to die. But Christ has come to be your ransom, and He has taken you out of death to sin and brought you into life as a son of God through His own death and resurrection. Into Jesus Christ, into His death and resurrection, you have been baptized, and by that water and the Word, you are claimed as God's own precious child—you are His; you belong to Him—all for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ.

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 ought not to do, and that you do not do what you ought and do what you ought not to do. 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. As Martin Luther wrote in the Heidelberg Disputation, not even one year after the 95 Theses were posted, "The Law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done; grace says, 'Believe in this,' and everything is already done."

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, the Word of God remains forever.

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 second hymn mentioned earlier, the next hymn you'll be singing:

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.