

Stop. Just Stop.

Reformation Day [Observed]

The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity

October 29, 2023

Matthew 11:12–15

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. This is the date that has been designated as the celebration of the Reformation. But there was a lot more to the Reformation than just this action of Luther. He wasn't even intending to start a reformation. By posting his theses in a public place he was engaging in scholarly debate about what he saw as errors and abuses in the Church. As time went by his speaking and writing became more bold about the false doctrine he saw in the Church.

Martin Luther wasn't trying to start anything. He was trying to take the Church back to doing what it is meant to do, and that is proclaim Christ. The Reformation is not about Martin Luther. It is about Christ. Martin Luther did not want people to know about him. They wanted them to know about Jesus. On our own, everything we do accomplishes nothing in the sight of God. We are poor, miserable, wretched sinners. The Reformation, as with everything else in the Church, is all about Christ and His pure righteousness and salvation.

This is what prompts the apostle Paul to say in the Epistle reading today that “whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are subject to the Law so that every mouth may be shut.” That is, “Shut Up. Just Shut Up.” For the title of my sermon I went with the more polite, “Stop. Just Stop.” You have nothing to say to God. You have nothing to offer Him. You cannot make a defense for yourself before God. He knows what is in your heart, He knows the thoughts that reside in your mind, He is aware of the things you do in secret just as the ones that others see.

Just stop trying to think that there is anything good about yourself of your own self. Or even worse, that there are people who are worse than you. It's easy to see the atrocities that occur in our world and think that because you are not as bad as those who commit them that you can't be all that bad. You are. Just stop trying to fool yourself. Paul says that the righteousness of God comes apart from the Law. It comes not through anything you do. In fact, Paul says, through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. Listen to that well. You are sinful through and through. That's what you need to know. You shouldn't believe yourself that you're really not all that bad.

For your salvation Paul points you not to anything you do but what Christ has done. He points you not to yourself but to Christ. This is exactly what Luther was doing in what came to be known as the Reformation. He saw that in the Church those entrusted with preaching and teaching were pointing people to themselves and what they needed to do in order to be forgiven by God. Luther was saying, No, it's all about Christ and how He has brought about forgiveness of sins in His suffering on the cross and rising from the grave. We need to just stop turning our forgiveness and salvation onto ourselves. It's insidious. In our fallen, sinful state we are prone to look within ourselves and convince ourselves that we are worthy in the sight of God. We are not.

But this is nothing new. It's not like it was just in the sixteenth century in Germany that the Church was full of false doctrine and there needed to be a reformation. Look at the way Jesus describes God's Kingdom in today's Gospel reading. He says that from the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of Heaven has been suffering violence and the violent take it by force. From the days of John the Baptist is when Jesus began His ministry. When Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven has been suffering violence and the violent take it by force He saying that there was an all-out attack on the Kingdom of God. Jesus came to bring salvation and yet people opposed Him and the devil and his hordes were assaulting Him.

But did this begin only when Jesus began His ministry? Did it stop once Jesus had died, rose, and ascended into heaven? No, in this fallen, sinful world God and His Kingdom have always been opposed. But it's not just from the outside. The worst of it is actually from the inside. When false prophets and false teachers peddle lies instead of proclaiming the truth. When pastors point people to themselves and that if they just do enough or give enough or believe enough then they will be saved. It happened in the Old Testament. It happened in the ministry of Christ. It has been happening ever since.

Jesus continues to say in the Gospel reading that the Law and the Prophets prophesied until John. The Law and the Prophets is one of the ways the Bible was referred to. It consisted of the Law, one of the ways the first five books of the Bible were referred to, and all the other books, collectively called the prophets. When Jesus says that the Law and the Prophets prophesied until John He is saying that the entire Bible prophesied until John the Baptist.

And what happened then? John said, "He's the one." He is the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Bible. Everything in the Old Testament points to Jesus. Jesus says that the coming of John the Baptist was prophesied in the Old Testament as the Elijah who was to come. In the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, the prophecy is that Elijah would come again to usher in the Messiah. This is John. John came on the scene not as the Messiah but as the one ushering in the Messiah. He is the one. This was the message of John. Jesus is the Messiah, the very Savior of the world.

There is nothing for you to do. There is nothing you can do. He has done it all. Jesus came not to add on to the laws of the Old Testament. He came to fulfill them. He came not to tell you what you need to do in order to be saved. He came to save you. This is why He suffered on the cross for the sin of the world, because we cannot save ourselves. This is why He gives us Baptism, because as Peter says in his first letter, "Baptism now saves you." It is why He commands pastors to forgive people's sins and preach the Gospel. It is why He gives us His body and blood in His Sacrament, to forgive us of our sins.

But must we do anything? Yes. We must believe. Jesus said often to people, "Your faith has saved you." Paul says in the Epistle reading that we are justified by faith in Christ. In the book of Acts the apostles often exhorted people to believe in Jesus. But it is precisely here where many in the Church will take this up and implore you to muster up the faith you need. That you need to

make sure you have enough faith. Your own sinful nature latches on to this as something you need to do in order to be forgiven and saved.

Stop. Just stop. You believe, yes. And yes, you need to believe. But even as you and I cannot do anything to be saved, even this work of faith we do is not something we ourselves produce. As Paul says in the Epistle reading, “We are justified by faith, apart from works of the Law.” Or as we will sing it as we continue the Hymn of the Day: “Faith clings to Jesus’ cross alone and rests in Him unceasing; and by its fruits true faith is known, with love and hope increasing. For faith alone can justify; works serve our neighbor and supply the proof that faith is living.” Amen.

SDG

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