

**Reformation Day [observed] (10/30/11 – Taking the Kingdom of Heaven by Force ...
Which Is to Say, by Faith in Christ)**

In the Name of JESUS. [Amen]

From the days of John the Baptizer until now the Kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force [MT 11.12]. In many ways, this *Gospel* is an obvious fit for the celebration of the ***Festival of the Reformation***. The “Kingdom of Heaven” – the Church – was suffering violence in those days ... as it has at different times and places throughout history. We read the history of the Reformation Era and hear of the corruption going on in the Church in various places. Priesthoods, even Bishoprics, were bought and sold – **not** to men who had studied God’s Holy Word and were properly prepared and proven ... but as **favours** to rich nobles.

The Kingdom of Heaven – the Christian Church – was suffering violence at the hands of men put into the Pastoral Office without even knowing the language and meaning of the words they were speaking. Many could not read any language at all! Yet they were to be pastors and teachers of the people?! When Luther made a visit to the congregations and pastors in the region of Saxony in 1528, he found what he could only describe as a “deplorable, miserable condition” of the Christian Church. *Dear God, save us! What manifold misery I have seen! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of the Christian teaching; and unfortunately many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach. Yet, all would be called Christians, are baptized and receive the Holy Sacrament, though they know neither the Lord’s Prayer nor the Creed or Ten Commandments. They live there like cattle and irrational pigs; and now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to misuse like masters all freedom.* [Small Catechism, Preface] Luther addressed his teaching and sermons on the basics of the Christian faith and life – known as the *Small* and *Large Catechisms* – to **pastors** ... who ought to have been **teachers** of the faith.

Of course, we know that Luther himself suffered violence. There are some, even today, who hold that Luther was a criminal worthy of death – not realizing that his “crime” was simply returning to God’s Word and desiring the correction of gross error in the churches of Germany. Back in the day, there was a price on Luther’s head. He had to be whisked away, secretly ... to the Wartburg Castle ...

in order to protect his life.

The Christian Church still faces persecution today. In some parts of the world – Egypt, most recently – believers are put to death for holding the true faith. Nothing is new under the sun. In the Old Testament, God’s faithful Prophets were killed. In the New Testament, John the Baptizer, Stephen, and nearly all of the Apostles were martyred. Not to mention the Lord Himself!

But the Church faces other types of violence in our day – once again from inside. False teaching and practice are rampant. The majority of mainline, Protestant denominations have thrown out any concept of the inspiration and inerrancy of Holy Scripture. And with this loss, all sorts of error and aberrant practice have entered. Same gender relations are not only accepted, but also encouraged – and even their pastors and bishops practice the same. Most importantly, they seem to have taken the *evangel* – the Gospel – out of *evangelical* ... and preach only moralism and a so-called “social gospel”.

Are there not other types of violence done to the Church ... by us? When we live our daily lives as if what we hear on Sunday only applies within the walls of the church building? When we long for a growth in the Church no matter what it must take to get it – apart from God’s Word and Sacraments by which the Holy Spirit works where and when He pleases to create and sustain faith? When we doubt that God’s Word and Sacraments are truly enough for our Christian faith and life – as if we needed something else ... a rule ... a Law ... a work by which **we** can live and grow our Sunday School, our Bible Study, our Church?

We must admit it: **we** do violence to the Kingdom of Heaven – the Church ... our fellow believers – all the time. We neglect our worship, devotions, and prayers. We fail to encourage our fellow believers when we see they are weak – lacking in attendance ... struggling with sin. We think – and act – as if the Kingdom of Heaven depends **on us** ... rather than completely on Christ. And when the Kingdom of Heaven Itself seems weak ... ineffective ... unfruitful – we doubt ... God’s Word ... God’s Sacraments ... God’s Gifts ... even God Himself.

Meanwhile, in our own lives, the dirge of the Law is sung – but we fail to mourn our sin [MT 11.17a]. We think it is for someone else only ... as if the sins described in the reading and preaching of God’s Word do **not** apply to **us**. On the other hand, when the Gospel flute is played, we fail to dance in joy and

thanksgiving that all our sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ [Mt 11.17b]. We mope around as if the Church ... our congregation, our lives ... were hopeless. Repent! Repent of your shoddy repentance! Repent of your lackluster joy at the sure and certain promise that your sin is forgiven in Christ!

You are no longer under the wrath of God in the Law – on account of which you must fast and forego any worldly joy ... like John. No! You are under the grace of God in the Gospel – because of which you may eat of the Lord’s bounty and celebrate the pure joy of the Gospel ... on a day like **Reformation** ... and every day.

For, ***now the righteousness of God has been manifested APART from the Law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it — the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*** [ROM 3.21-22] Although ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*** – including each and every one of us – we are all, without distinction ... ***justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*** [ROM 3.23-24] Out of His great, eternal love for us, ***God put*** His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, ***forward as a propitiation*** – as the atoning sacrifice for our sin – ***by His blood, to be received by faith*** [ROM 3.25].

And here is where we come to the sermon title for this ***Festival of the Reformation***. For you are ***Taking the Kingdom of Heaven by Force ... Which Is to Say, by Faith in Christ***. Commenting on our *Holy Gospel* text, Luther wrote: *The Gospel is not preached in vain; there are people who hear it and love it violently, so that they hazard body and life for the sake of God’s Word. When they hear the Gospel, their conscience drives them on, so that none can keep them away.* In Luther’s day, the people virtually laid siege to the churches of those preachers who faithfully proclaimed the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ. Luther’s writings and hymns could not be printed fast enough to keep up with the demand [*The Sermon and the Propers*, IV.138-139].

There is, indeed, what we might call a “holy violence” in Christ’s Church. It is a spiritual violence, by which ***the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God*** [EPH 6.17] – a Word that ***is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*** [HEB 4.12] – kills us by Its

Law ... then makes us alive again by Its Gospel.

At the same time, it is a passive force. For the faith by which we are ***Taking the Kingdom of Heaven by Force*** is **given to us** by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament. Again and again, we hear the Gospel message that the righteousness of Christ is accounted **to us** by God's grace. Over and over, the righteousness of Christ's perfectly holy life and death, resurrection and ascension is set before our eyes. And the Holy Spirit is working in that Gospel message to ever create and sustain a living faith in us that tenaciously – almost violently – grasps onto the forgiveness of sins found only in Christ our Lord and Savior.

Above all, ***the Kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence*** in that the Son of God – the King and Lord of the Kingdom of Heaven ... indeed, the Flesh and Blood manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth – suffered violence at the hands of sinful men ... willingly ... **for us and for our eternal salvation**. All the Prophets that went beforehand – all who suffered death because they faithfully proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God in the Christ – were foreshadowing what Jesus Christ Himself would suffer in the world on our behalf. And all the martyrs who follow Christ – the believers throughout the ages – have suffered the same fate of their Teacher and Master [MT 10.24-25].

But all our suffering – and all the suffering of all the saints ***from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah*** [MT 23.35] ... and to this very day – is excluded in our salvation. Neither we – nor they – have any boast in our works. For, as St. Paul declares: ***we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law*** [ROM 3.28]. Our boast is in Christ ... and in Him alone! For Christ our dear Lord not only suffered violence, but also has “violently” taken the Kingdom of Heaven by force. Jesus Christ is the Strong Man, Who entered the house dominated by the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh ... has bound satan ... and has plundered what looked like his goods – namely, **us** – to set us truly free indeed ... forever! [MT 12.29; JN 8.36]

In the strength of the Son's work **for us and for our salvation**, we are ***Taking the Kingdom of Heaven by Force ... Which Is to Say, by Faith in Christ*** we have entered the Kingdom of Heaven ... **already now** ... and **will** enter that heavenly bliss on the Last Day ... to dwell with God eternally!

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]