

Matthew 11:12–15  
Reformation Sunday  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
Trinity, Frankfurt  
October 29, 2023

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today the church observes Reformation Day, the commemoration of Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 Theses onto the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany which sparked a movement that continues to this day. The date was October 31st, 1517, the eve of All Saints' Day. Wittenberg would have been crowded with all the people coming to see the relics collected by Elector Frederick the Wise in the Castle Church. If you make a pilgrimage to the Luther House Museum in Wittenberg today, you can see a catalog of the Elector's 17,443 relics that were on display, including St. Anne's thumb, a twig from the burning bush, hay from the manger, and even milk from the Virgin Mary's breast. A pilgrim to Wittenberg in Luther's day could receive an indulgence of up to 1,902,202 years and 270 days off of purgatory. That's not too bad for a minimal entrance fee!

Of course, it's no accident Luther chose to make a fuss on the day he did. With all the people flocking to Wittenberg to view the relics, or to nearby towns to pay for some time off of purgatory, Luther's 95 Theses against indulgences could have a huge effect. Luther wrote up his theses and nailed them to the doors of the Castle Church, hoping for an academic debate. The Theses were quickly translated into German, published, and distributed throughout the Holy Roman Empire. Soon everyone was talking about the events in Wittenberg. The controversy flared, Luther and his followers drew ever deeper from the well of the Scriptures in an attempt to put the church back on the right path, and the Reformation of the western catholic church was

underway. And it all revolved around Thesis 1: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” [Matthew 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” The Reformation is all about repentance, as individuals, as a congregation, and as the church as a whole. The Reformation is all about returning to the Word of God to order our doctrine and life. And so the church is always reforming, always being reformed, by conforming again to God’s Word.

The historic Gospel text for Reformation Day is from Matthew 11, where Jesus describes how the Kingdom of Heaven is received. John the Baptist was sitting in prison, and he sent messengers to Jesus to ask Him: “Are you the one to come, or should we look for another?” Of course, Jesus is the one. He heals the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the deaf. He raises the dead and preaches good news to the poor. And yet John the Baptist was sitting in prison for preaching repentance to those in high places. Jesus says: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”

At first, this statement might come across as though the Kingdom of God, the Church, is being attacked. Although it’s certainly true that the kingdom of heaven *is* being attacked, Jesus here means something else. This verse could just as well be translated: “The kingdom of heaven exercises force” and the “forceful ones snatch it.” This becomes clearer when you compare our Gospel Text with a parallel passage, Luke 16:16: “The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, *and everyone forces his way into it.*” Jesus is describing the urgency and the passion by which the Gospel was being received. The people were storming Heaven. They couldn’t get enough of our Lord’s preaching and healing. That’s what happens when Reformation comes.

At the time of John the Baptist, the scribes and Pharisees were locking up the kingdom of heaven and shutting it in people's faces, as Matt 23:13 says. In the late medieval church, the papacy and the church hierarchy were locking up the kingdom of heaven and shutting it in people's faces. They were trying to sell the free forgiveness that comes in Jesus Christ alone. Even today, there are forces within the church attempting to silence the full counsel of God and shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. But the faithful surround the kingdom of heaven and lay siege to it. They storm the kingdom of heaven and take it by force. They don't let anything or anyone get in their way. They plunder the treasure of God's Word and hold on to it for dear life.

All this might come across as rather violent, but that's the kind of passion Jesus is calling for when it comes to entering the kingdom of Heaven; not physical violence, but a spiritual vigor. Remember, Jesus says not to take up the sword because His kingdom is not of this world. In the same vein of passion for the things of God, Jesus also compares the kingdom of heaven to a treasure hidden in a field, which a man finds, covers up, and then sells everything for that field. Or like the merchant who finds a pearl of great price, and then goes to sell everything he has for that one pearl. The kingdom of heaven might seem insignificant at first, but the Holy Spirit awakens an insatiable desire for it. That's why Christians from all times and places have laid down their lives gladly for the kingdom of God. To confess Christ can bring with it public shame, persecution, imprisonment, and even death, yet the saints of old joyfully spilled their blood for the cause. The kingdom of heaven is worth everything. It's something worth fighting for.

Jesus continues: "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come." The Law and the Prophets together refer to the

entire Old Testament, which bore the promises of the Messiah until the ministry of John. John the Baptist then came in the spirit and power of Elijah. He came to call to repentance, to “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” as the last verse of the Old Testament puts it, lest the LORD come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. John preached in the wilderness: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:3). . . . “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt 3:11). Of course, John the Baptist is referring to Jesus. Jesus is the greater one, the stronger man, the LORD Himself who has become man to usher in the great and awful day. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Next, Jesus speaks about the adulterous, unfaithful, and scoffing generation in which he lived, the offspring of the serpent among whom we still live in this world: “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’” No matter how the Kingdom of Heaven is communicated to this generation, they simply won’t receive it. The unbelieving world despises John’s austerity, out in the wilderness dressed like the prophet Elijah, preaching a fiery message of repentance. The unbelieving world despises Jesus’s tenderness, his message of comfort for sinners: “Come unto me all you who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” John came, neither eating, nor drinking, and they say: “He has a demon.” Jesus, the Son of Man, comes eating and drinking, and they say: “Look at Him! A glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” No matter how the message is preached, the generation of scoffers will find a way to reject it, like children throwing a temper tantrum. Nothing will please them because defiance is all they desire!

Don't be surprised when the world rejects the Kingdom of Heaven. On the one hand, when God's Word calls for repentance, people will say: "But that's too hard! Why are you so closed minded? Why can't you just live and let live? Don't worry about what others are doing!" And on the other hand, when God's Word seeks to comfort repentant sinners, who are forgiven because of Jesus's death on the cross, people will say: "But that's too easy! How can you just let people off the hook like that? Isn't so and so beyond forgiveness? Look at how horrible his mistakes are!" Whether through the call to repentance or the call to faith, the unbelieving, scoffing generation will always take issue with God's Word. Repentance is too hard and forgiveness too easy. If you play the flute they will not dance and if you sing a dirge they will not mourn. Nothing will please them because defiance is all they desire!

"Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." Thesis 1: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" [Matthew 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Repentance consists of two parts. First, contrition, or sorrow over sin, terror striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin. The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel or the Absolution and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven. This message comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror. Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruit of repentance (AC XII). Reformation is repentance. It's not a one-time event, but the entire life of the Christian, the entire life of a congregation, and of the church at large, a continual confession of sins and receiving the free forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ and walking in newness of life.

Reformation is a call to put first things first, to reorient our lives according to God's Word. The generation in which we live scoffs at Reformation and ridicules repentance. It's lukewarm when it comes to the things of God and will always find fault with the church's

proclamation. But may the LORD grant us His grace to recognize our sins and turn to the forgiveness found in Jesus Christ alone. May the LORD grant us that zeal for God's Word that storms Heaven and stops at nothing to obtain what God has promised. May the LORD grant true Reformation for you and for His entire Church until the Last Day. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.