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“The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence”

Text: Matthew 11:12-15

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

We heard two statements today that seem contradictory. We sang “A Mighty Fortress is our God” – a hymnic version of Psalm 46; and then we heard in the Holy Gospel: “***From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.***” So which is it? Fortress or violence? Peace or struggle? Victory or defeat?

Well, the answer is . . . yes. These statements are, in fact, not contradictory, but *both* true of the Church. Today we celebrate the Festival of the Reformation, which we could call the Festival of the Gospel, and today we remember that the Church on earth is the **Church Militant**. (Blood red paraments) *Next week* we will celebrate the Festival of All Saints, and then we remember that the Church in Heaven is the **Church Triumphant**. But they are not in reality two Churches, but one Church . . . just for now, for a time, in two different places and in two different states. Now we live in the Church Militant. We live in enemy territory. The Church here and now is not a Church of peace and perfection, but a Church constantly in a struggle to preserve pure teaching and doctrine. Constantly struggling, because Satan is constantly fighting, and he will give us no rest until the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is defeated and snuffed out.

And so in the beginning, Satan attacked God’s Word in the Garden. In the time of the Old Testament, God’s prophets, speaking His Words of repentance and forgiveness, were stoned and killed. When John the Baptist came, his message of repentance and reformation of hearts and lives was not welcomed by many. The Church after Christ was often persecuted for this message, and so it was also for Martin Luther. The very first of his 95 Theses, which he nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg 487 years ago today was a message no different than the prophets and John the Baptist: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” [Mt 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” (LW vol. 31, p 25) Repentance, faith, and forgiveness. *sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura*. By grace alone, by faith alone, by scripture alone. And for this message the prophets were stoned, John was beheaded, Christians were burned at the stake and thrown to the lions, and the Emperor issued a hunting license on Luther’s life for twenty-six years.

And the situation is no different in our day and age today. The Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone is under attack, *because this message upsets the world and what it thinks should be*. To say that we are not good enough for God, that

none of our efforts, or sincerity, or good works, or faith is good enough for God, and that we must live by repentance, faith, and forgiveness in Jesus Christ alone, well . . . the world disagrees. Surely, if one tries hard enough, or is sincere enough, or does enough good works, then he or she will surely be saved. There is no absolute right and wrong, and so no standard against which to call people to repentance. You Christians are too rigid. Other religions are simply misunderstood and are not so bad. We are all basically good people. We all worship the same God. Peace and unity is more important than doctrine and teaching. . . . And if you dare to contradict this, then you will be put down and put out. You will suffer violence. You must be silenced.

Now that sounds pretty bleak, I know. You don't come to church to hear about violence. That's the stuff of Islamic/Mohammedan jihadists and terrorists. But, in fact, Luther called suffering one of the marks of the true Church. (LW vol. 41, p 164-165) For the true Church, which proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, will live under the cross she proclaims. Jesus said, ***"If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."*** (John 15:20) We live in the Church Militant. . . . And yet, this is not bad news, for we know that the cross that we proclaim, and that we live under, is not a cross of defeat, but of victory! It is a cross of suffering that leads to eternal life! It is Christ's victory banner over Satan, who therefore wants us to talk about everything and anything *but* the cross! For then he wins! For Christ without the cross is no Saviour at all. The Church without the cross is only a social club. And you can be sure that Churches that proclaim Christ crucified will not go ignored or left alone by Satan.

And so if we suffer for the Gospel, we do not despair! On the contrary, we are filled with not only hope, but joy! For while our suffering and struggling tells us that the enemy is real, the Gospel tells us that he cannot win. And so we know that our struggle is not in vain. The Gospel that we believe, teach, and confess is (as we heard in Revelation) an *eternal* Gospel – a Gospel that will never go away. The Gospel that *"Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me 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."* (Small Catechism, Explanation of the Second Article) These words are more powerful than our enemy, and his weapons and violence. For these are words of good news; the words of forgiveness; of God's great love for sinners like you and me; of the length God was willing to go to save you and make you His child. And it happened on a cross. The cross where Satan tried to silence the Word of God once and for all. The violent cross of wood and nails, blood and gore, forsakenness and dereliction. The cross that looked like utter defeat, but which turned out three days later to be the hammer blow which crushed Satan's head. Whatever the world can do to you, it can do only in this life. But the blessings and salvation of God in Christ Jesus are forever.

And so Luther could pen, *"And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, let these*

all be gone, they yet have nothing won.” John the Baptist lived in the wilderness, dressed in camel’s hair, and eating locusts. Because they knew that the things of this world count for nothing; God counts for everything. God who died on the cross for you and me. God who does not hold our sins against us, but put them on His Son instead. God who did not wait for us to be good enough to be saved, but who came because we would never be good enough. Who came to provide for us what we could not do for ourselves. Who came to declare to us that in Christ and His cross, our sins are forgiven. His life for yours. To make you His children. To give you an everlasting kingdom. All yours by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. In Him alone; the only one who could do it, and who did do it!

How much violence those words, those simple words, have stirred up over the years! How much violence they continue to stir up today. . . . But that’s okay. On this side of eternity, it will always be so. We live in the Church Militant. And so as long as we are in this world, we will take up the weapons of the Gospel, and fight. We will strive and fight with **the faith**, the doctrine of the prophets and the apostles. We will fight with **repentance**, humbling ourselves under God and His Word and relying on His strength, not our own. We will fight with **prayer**, relying on the promises of God, knowing that Jesus Himself is still praying for us. We will fight with the **Word of God**, and with **His Sacraments**, for when we hear the Word of God and guard it in our hearts; when we baptize infants, children, and adults; when we eat and drink the body and blood of our Saviour; when we hear that our sins are forgiven – in all of these seemingly weak and insignificant things, great victories are being won. Satan is being defeated and great violence being done to him and *his* kingdom. The Gospel is being proclaimed and lived. Christians are being born and forgiven and strengthened.

If you suffer for this Gospel, you are blessed. If not, you are blessed. But whatever your outward circumstances, the love of Christ and His cross, and your Father’s love and forgiveness for you remain the same. And if you suffer for this Gospel, you are in good company. You join the prophets and apostles, the fathers and martyrs who have gone before us. You join those Christians who are suffering violence and persecution today. You join our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and receive His cross. His cross which is our Fortress. Or as we hear in Psalm 46, ***“we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. . . . The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”***

The Lord Almighty is with us: in the manger, on the cross, on the altar.

The Lord Almighty is with us: in His Word, His Baptism, His body and blood.

The Lord Almighty is with us: in good times and bad; in suffering and persecution; in trial and temptation.

The Lord Almighty is with us, for it is His Church. Militant and Triumphant – the same Church. His Church. His forgiveness. His Gospel. His victory. So do not fear. The Lord Almighty is with us. The kingdom ours remaineth.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.