

28 October 2018
The Festival of the Reformation

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Jesus, Here, For You”

Text: Matthew 11:12-19 (Romans 3:19-28)

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

Some would say that we should not have a Festival of the Reformation. We should not celebrate this day, but, in fact, mourn. For the Reformation, they would say, divided the church. A wound from which she still has not recovered. So you should sing a dirge today, not *A Mighty Fortress*. The color should be purple, not red. There should be repentance, not rejoicing. Luther is no hero, but a villain. Not a reformer, but a revolutionary. Not a faithful son of the church, but a traitor. Benedict Arnold, so some would say.

What shall we say to this?

Well, the church had been divided long before Luther ever came along. The apostle Paul already speaks of divisions in the church in the first century. In fact, he says, *there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized* (1 Corinthians 11:19). After Paul, various heresies and false teachings in the early church caused splits, and there was what was called “the great schism” at the turn of the millenium - some 500 years before the Reformation - when the Eastern and Western Churches excommunicated each other. It seems that if the church was ever united, it wasn't for long.

Which, honestly, is what we should expect. We heard a couple of weeks ago, when we celebrated St. Michael and All Angels, that satan had been cast down to the earth, and with that, the war *in heaven* ended, but the war *on earth* had just begun. The kingdom of God would suffer violence. The church would be not a church at peace and rest, but the church militant. Satan will attack Christians, trying to lure us away from our Saviour. He will attack the church, dividing her with false doctrine and sometimes even petty squabbles. And he will seek to infiltrate, too. That false doctrine find a home in the church and eat her away from the inside out, so that she is nothing but a empty shell with nothing of substance inside.

But though some sing a dirge on this day, it is not a time to mourn. For one very simple reason. Not because of Luther. We thank God for him, as we do for all the church fathers who came before us, who fought for the truth, who often gave their lives, and on whose

shoulders we stand.

Nor do we celebrate the start of a new church, a Lutheran one, for that would be a grave misunderstanding of what our church really is. For we are no new church, but a very old one. For there is, in fact, only one church. One true one. The church which is the Body of Christ. The church which is made up of those who belong to Christ. Those baptized by Him, fed by Him, absolved by Him, who believe in Him. The Christians of the Old Testament who believed in the promise of His coming, and the Christians of the New Testament who believe that He came, fulfilling all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament. One church, hidden in this world of violence and division and sin.

No, we will not mourn for this reason: because **Jesus is here**. And as Jesus said: *can the wedding guests mourn when the Bridegroom is with them* (Matthew 9:15)?

Yes, we mourn our sins and repent of them. And there is no shortage of sin to confess in our lives. But our mourning is not for long, for then we hear the Word of Absolution, that our sin is forgiven, taken away, not counted against us. You are free. And then we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus, His pledge to us of the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life. That He who places His Body and Blood into our bodies, will come and raise these bodies to eternal life. So a foretaste of the feast to come, we call the Lord's Supper. This is just the appetizer of the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom. One feast, though on many altars now.

So how can we mourn when such great forgiveness is ours? This, for Luther, made all the difference in the world.

Often times, the Reformation is boiled down to the three *solas*: salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, revealed in Scripture alone. Or that it was all about justification by grace through faith, aparts from works of the law, as we heard from Romans today. And those are certainly true and hallmarks of the Reformation.

But maybe what the Reformation really boiled down to was this: **Jesus is here for you**.

You see, at the time of the Reformation, if you really wanted to get close to God and find Jesus, if you really wanted to be spiritual, you were told to enter a monastery. And there, through poverty, chastity, and obedience, through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, through climbing the ladder up to God in meditation and contemplation, you could find Him, get close to Him, making yourself holy. And Luther tried. He really tried. But the more he climbed, the farther away he got. And maybe you've tried that, too. Praying more, reading more, obeying more, trying more, trying to climb, trying to get to God . . . and it all seems for naught. Life comes crashing down, problems pile up, old sins return, and you find yourself no closer to God than when you started.

Then there were other reformers, radical ones, who said, yes, God is far away. That's quite right. He was here, but He ascended into heaven, to the right hand of God, and is as far away from us as heaven is from earth. But you can't get to Him by climbing earthly ladders! Or doing earthly things. Oh no! You must ascend spiritually. In your heart. Or ask God into your heart. Oh yes, that's where God is. . . . But Luther looked into his heart and didn't find God there. He found sin. He found doubts, fears, mistrust, pride, envy, unholy desires, anger, bitterness - everything but God! And, if you like me, that's true for you, too.

And then there were those who say not to worry, for *God is everywhere*. But if God is everywhere, is He anywhere? And while that may be true, is it comforting? Comforting when we see the sin in the world? Comforting when we see the sin in us? Comforting when sin comes crashing down on us? Comforting when sin comes erupting out of us? Because why isn't He doing something? A small child having a nightmare might know her parents are in the house, but that is not the comfort she needs! She wants them there, right there, for her! Holding her in their arms, speaking to her, reassuring her, loving her. Us too.

And so Luther's question: I can't climb up to God, there's only sin in my heart, and yes, God is everywhere . . . *but where is He for me?*

And so the Reformation really came down to this: **Jesus is God, here, for me**. I don't climb up to Him, *He climbed down to me*. He's not in my heart; *I'm in His*. And yes, He is the God who is big, *but who became small*, and here, **for me**. To do something. And this isn't just history; something that happened a long time ago. It is still true today. And here.

For *where is God?* He is curled up in His mother's arms. He is laid in a manger. He is touching lepers. He is consoling widows. He is giving sight to the blind. He is giving hearing to the deaf. He is loving the outcasts. He is being arrested. He is being whipped and mocked. He is nailed to a cross. He is laid in a tomb. But then He is risen from the dead! The three days of mourning are over, and now is the time of rejoicing. And yes, He ascended into heaven, but not to leave, not to be far away, but to be with us more than He was before! For when He ascended, He also promised this: "*Lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20).

And so He is. With us. For as He descended from heaven and was made man, so He does not now make us climb up to Him with what we do or ascend to Him in our hearts - He is still coming to us, still here with us, for us. His hands still washing us, His voice still absolving us and teaching us, His Body and Blood still feeding us. Here is my Mighty Fortress when the devil attacks. Here is my refuge when my sins weigh heavy on me. Here is my comfort when the world crashes down on me, when things don't make any sense. Here is the Jesus who has overcome the world for me, and so I know that I too will

overcome. Though it come through a cross, though it come through death and the grave. He is Lord even of these. And He is my Lord, here, for me.

From this reality, really, sprung the Reformation. That the righteousness of God isn't something to achieve, but given to us in Christ. That Jesus isn't far away, but here. That we don't have to find Him somehow, but He finds us. From that sprung the three solas. From that sprung the teaching of justification. **From Jesus, not far away; but here, for me.**

And so for us. What we celebrate today is not a man or a church, but **Jesus, here, for me.** The almighty God weak for me. The all-present God here for me. The living God crucified for me. The holy God made sin for me. The God of all creation here loving me and forgiving me.

And this too: a church where the violent come and still take Jesus by force. For when Jesus was born of Mary, violent men came and took Him by force and put Him on a cross. Because He wanted them to. He allowed them to. For us. And now He bids us do the same! For us men and women, violent in our sin, to come and take Him. Because He wants us to. To come and take Him. To grab hold of His forgiveness! To take His Body and Blood! To seize His promises and not let them go! And to rejoice, that Jesus is here for you exactly for this. To be *a friend of tax collectors and sinners*. Of the outcasts, the not-good-enoughs, the broken, the hurting.

And any church that does not teach this, needs to be reformed.

And so this really is a day to rejoice. As it says in the book of Ecclesiastes, *there is a time to mourn, and a time to dance* (Ecclesiastes 3:4b). And this is the time to dance and rejoice in the forgiveness and life of **Jesus, here, for you.**

We're not going to satisfy the world and its desires. As we heard in the Holy Gospel today, they're going to want us to dance to *their* tune. But when Jesus is proclaimed, when Jesus is given, when Jesus is played, then there is joy and we dance to *that* tune. For this is the truth, the reality, that gives hope in the midst of whatever life throws at you. That doesn't mean life will be easy! It wasn't for Jesus or Luther, for Paul or the apostles. But as Paul would write - even from prison - *Rejoice in the Lord always*. Why? For, he says, *the Lord is at hand* (Philippians 4:4-5). Literally! Bow your head, open your mouth, reach out your hand, and you have Him. **Jesus, and His life and His forgiveness, is here, for you.**

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.