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The Festival of the Reformation Vienna, VA

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"A Truth Worth Proclaiming"
Text: Matthew 11:12-19; Romans 3:19-28; Revelation 14:6-7; Psalm 46

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

Our remembrance and celebration of the Reformation at the end of October always coincides with, and honestly often gets overshadowed by . . . no, not Halloween! (Though that's true, too.) I was thinking Election Day. Which these days is often scarier than Halloween! Polls, doom sayers, endless ads, mudslinging, and every election now, we are told, is the most important election of all time. Everything has become political, it is said, and politics has wormed its way into everything. Everyone has an opinion, and everyone's opinion is right, of course! Because truth is not objective, we are told, but subjective. Not out there, but in here. The truth is not black and white, not unchangeable, but shades of gray, and fungible. A belief which has led to greater and greater polarization, demonizing, confusion, and violence.

I don't know if it's worse now than before. That's just *recency bias*, I think. The belief that everything is worse now, or everything is better now, than it was before. That thinking is just a manifestation of sin - sin which is man curved in on himself, consumed with himself, focused on himself, rather than on God and on others. Recency bias is just that on a larger scale. It is *society* curved in on itself.

For polarization, demonizing, confusion, and violence is nothing new. We heard it from Jesus today. He said, ***From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force***. That was, of course, first and foremost true of Jesus Himself, who is the kingdom of heaven, the king of heaven, in human flesh. He was accused of being demon-possessed. He had mud slung on Him, called the illegitimate child of Joseph and Mary. He was opposed by those who held political office. And ultimately suffered the violence of flogging and crucifixion. That was true also of John, who was beheaded by a politician. And if we had the time, we could take this all the way back to the beginning, when Abel suffered violence at the hand of his own brother, Cain.

But why is this? Why the violence? Why is the church seemingly always out-of-step with the world, not mourning when the world mourns, or dancing when the world dances?

The answer, I think, is simple. And we heard it in the reading from Romans today. The truth that ***there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus***. And that is the ***eternal Gospel*** spoken of in the reading from Revelation today. The truth which is trans-political, trans-cultural, trans-national, not subject to change with the times, but objectively true no matter who you are or when or where or how you live. Because the truth is that we don't have a politics problem, we have a sin problem. We just don't want to admit it.

So you may have heard the little slogan, especially around this time of the year when we remember the Reformation, *ecclesia semper reformanda*, which means, the church is always reforming. It's true, if understood correctly. Sadly, it's not so much these days by those who take it mean that the church must change with the times . . . which usually means change our definition of sin, or at least, not talk about it so much. But to what end? That the demonization and opposition end? That the church be bigger and more successful? More influential? But if she's already been influenced by the world to change, and given up the truth, what does she have left? The church, then, is just echoing what the world says and parroting the latest pablum.

So instead of *ecclesia semper reformanda*, it would be better for us to say, *ecclesia semper paenitens* - the church is always repenting. That is, instead of changing our definition of sin to make ourselves feel better and looking for loopholes, explanations, and exceptions; instead of demonizing others and pointing out *their* sin rather than my own; instead of relying on and looking to politics to solve our problems, we instead fall on our knees at the foot of the cross and say, *God, be merciful to me, the sinner* (Luke 18:13).

Because really, *<u>that's</u>* what the Reformation was all about. It wasn't a rebellion, it wasn't a revolution, though it is often co-opted it to be those things - it was a repenting and turning to the cross. But <u>not</u> repenting as punishment, as humiliation and self-abasement and somehow earning God's favor and making up for my sin by myself and beating myself up. People were already doing that! It was repenting, acknowledging the truth of my sin, and turning to the cross and finding the mercy of God there. The Reformation was about the truth that **the righteousness of God wasn't a demand for us to fulfill, but a gift for us to receive**.

So you'll also often hear quoted this time of year the first of Luther's 95 theses, that *When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, He willed the entire like of believers to be one of repentance*. Which is true. But don't stop there! There's 94 more theses after that one! Including this one, number 62: *The true treasure of the*

church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God. The eternal Gospel that while yes, it is true, that ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*** this is true as well, that those same "all" ***are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus***. That is to say, that if our sin is the objective truth, so is our redemption.

Being popular, being accepted, is easy. Just tell people what they want to hear and do what they want you to do. Mourn what the world mourns, and rejoice in what the world rejoices in. Don't change the world with the Word, let the world change the Word. That might save you from suffering demonization, opposition, and violence now, but also usher in an eternity in hell.

OR . . . you can *repent*. And instead of trying to justify yourself and what you do or did, and how you think and what you want, because that's what loopholes, explanations, and exceptions do; instead of trying to justify yourself, repent of all that! Give it up! And receive the mercy of God. The mercy of God Jesus died on the cross to provide for you and give to you. The mercy of the forgiveness of all your sins. Of not just forgetting about them or hiding your sins for a while, but having them wiped out by the blood of Jesus. His blood poured on you in Baptism, spoken upon you in the Absolution, preached to you in the Gospel, and fed to you in the Supper. Grace upon grace. Because we need it! Because sins are stubborn things! But the grace and mercy of God is greater; *the true treasure of the church*.

Now you'd think such a message of good news would be welcome! But if sins are stubborn things, pride is the most stubbornest of them all! Pride which doesn't want to face or admit or confess our sin and so wars against repentance, and so wars against the Gospel. That's why God's Word is full of such statements as these: the first shall be last, and the last first. The exalted will be humbled, and the humble exalted. Our pride must first be killed, our self-reliance and self-exaltation and self-preservation, which ain't easy! But <u>*then*</u> *a new man* can *arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever* (SC, Baptism IV).

A new man to live before God *forever*, yes; but to also live before man *now*. To live the Gospel in a difficult, sinful, and sin-fulled world. And maybe for you that is in politics, and if it is, God bless ya! We'll pray for you! But for most of us, it is on a much smaller - but no easier - scale. In our families, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods. Speaking a truth that won't be welcome, that will be opposed and demonized and even spark violence. And we'll be tempted in two ways. First, be cowed into silence, to live and let live. Or the opposite, go in full fury and try to change the world in a day. Don't do either of those things.

Rather, rely on the one who promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against

His church. Rely on the one who died and rose for you. Live in your callings. And be patient. *Be still, and know that I am God*, as Psalm 46, the Mighty Fortress psalm says. Or, *Be still and know that **I** am God*, not you. And that's one of the other great benefits of repentance - it is not trying control things myself, it is relying on the one who is in control. In control even while hanging on the cross, when Rome and the Jewish leaders thought *they* were in control! Nope! Even there, even then, Jesus was in control, laying down His life, not having it taken from Him. Laying down His life in love for you, for the forgiveness of your sins. And if *that* is true, then He is in control even in the turmoil of this life, even the turmoil of your life.

So live in your callings. And be patient. Because heterodoxy, or we could say falsehood, or sin, is always in a hurry; but orthodoxy, or the truth, is not. Not that the truth isn't important - it is! But as a man you may have heard of, GK Chesterton, explained it: Heterodoxy or falsehood or sin is always in a hurry because it seeks to conquer the present moment; it is restless and frantic to change with the times. Orthodoxy is not because it rests upon the permanence of eternity. True orthodoxy is patient, timeless, and has no need to rush because it rests on enduring truth. Or better to say, because it rests on the *one* who *is* the enduring truth - Jesus Christ. And so we pray in the Lord's Prayer, *Thy will be done*. And know that it is. The devil could not stop it. The world cannot stop it. Christ is risen! And that changes everything.

And that confidence and faith is what enabled Luther to say: *I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philipp and Amsdorf, the Word did its work*. The Word made flesh, that it, *through* the Word here preached and given.

Well, this sermon has come a long and winding way! So let me sum it up this way: We live in a frightening, very political world. The temptation to give in to fear or trust in politics is always with us. The true church is out-of-step with the world, and we shouldn't expect it to be otherwise. And the truth - the truth of our sin and the truth of our Saviour - will bring division and violence. But as we sang in Psalm 46, We will not fear! *We will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea* . . . though *the nations rage and kingdoms totter*. And why? ***The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress***. He is with us in the flesh, risen from the dead, and with the fortress of His Word and Sacraments.

So we will repent. *Ecclesia semper paenitens.* And we'll take refuge in Christ. Because whatever happens in the world, and however this latest election turns out, Jesus and His truth, His word and promises, will never change. And no matter what the government is, and no matter who tries to stamp out the truth, the truth shall remain. The Gospel is eternal. For Christ is risen from the dead! And in Him, so *will*

you, and so *<u>are</u>* you. In Him, living a life that is eternal. And that is a truth worth celebrating and proclaiming.

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.