

2020 Reformation Day

From the very beginning people have been adding to the Word of God. Eve, tempted by the devil said, “We cannot eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil or touch it.” But God never said she couldn’t touch it, she added that on. Seems trivial, no big deal, but, of course, we know how that story ended.

The pharisees in Jesus’ day had taken the Lord’s ten commandments, and yes, the ceremonial purity laws, there were many of those, but they had ballooned these into 613 laws. They added to the Word of God. And so our Lord chastises them for the heavy loads they put on the people.

In the early Church, some were saying Jesus had already returned a second time, others said new converts had to change to look like Jewish people, others said you could keep sinning and grace would abound. Each one added to the teachings of the Word of God and each, in turn, had to be rebuked and corrected by the apostles.

The Catholic Church, by Luther’s day in the 1500s, had added indulgences - payment for grace, they added a system of contrition and repentance, a teaching that Mary was a co-redemptrix and sinless, they had added relics – objects that by veneration gave you grace, they added prayer to saints, purgatory, monastic systems, celibacy of priests. They added to the Word of God and, like whitewash

over a painting, it shrouded the beautiful Gospel of salvation by grace. It all shrouded the cross, because if you could work the system to earn heaven and the resurrection, why did you need the Cross? To just get it started? Then why does he promise to complete that which he begun in us?

On reformation day we don't celebrate an addition. We celebrate a subtraction, an excision. As the additions to the Word of God are cut out like a tumor. So that the cross would be uncluttered, the grace of God unveiled.

But Additions continued after the reformation and even during it. Yes, in the shadow of the reformation, in Luther's lifetime, other reformers sprung up who, "wanting to finish what Luther started," imposed new thought upon the scriptures, clouding what had long been scripturally taught on communion, baptism, images, and on and on. And so, similarly, the grace of God was emptied of power.

And they continue in more recent times. How about Joseph Smith? He looks into his hat with a seer's stone and translates the Book of Mormon, new teaching that's "better than the corrupted Bible." A Bible which he re-"translated" adding significant portions to the King James Version. And once more, as always, the cross of Jesus is obscured and so many are led astray chasing planets and working to their own righteousness.

Or consider our fellow namesakes in the ELCA who have added contemporary and modern worldviews on top of the scriptures. And it so obscures the Bible that they hide away teachings of scriptures on life and sexuality and has so obscured the truth that some of their pastors don't believe in the miracles of the Bible or the resurrection! And as Paul says, that is a faith that is "vain," empty.

Even more, modern day "Prophets and Apostles" in Church bodies produce new revelations and visions, and even the Pope, just this week, announced changes to their views on marriage. Addition, addition, addition. Veils, confusion, and a hidden cross.

And lest we think we are immune to such things, are we tempted to think the scriptures are out of touch? Are we tempted to want a new message, a new miracle, "just so we know you're real God?" Do we pray that we will be more faithful, more obedient if this particular hardship passes? Do we set up worship styles, or traditions up as signs of the true church more than the pure Gospel and Sacraments. Are we immune to causing division based on things scripture makes no command for or against? Do we think God will like us more if we just cleaned ourselves up a bit? No, I don't think we are immune to such temptations.

So how do we react against such developments in the Church and in our hearts?

Well, we get out our scalpels and cut the additions out! We embrace, as the Reformers did before us, the Word of God in its purity and preeminence.

In our First Reading from Revelation we hear of the “eternal” Gospel, that is unchanging and for all people, times, and places. In the same Revelation we hear the warning in chapter 22, “I testify to everyone who hears the words of prophecy in this book: If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes away from the words of this book of prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and the holy city, which are described in this book.”

In our Gospel lesson our Lord says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.” His Word! Eyewitness testimony of people who sat with Jesus, watched his death, laughed and spoke with him after he was risen. The Word of God: His teaching spread through manuscripts to little Churches like ours around the world. And the Churches kept them, copied them, sent them on. There were imposters, but much like we do, we look at some new teaching, we compare it with what we have been handed down, compare it to what is trusted, and cast it aside – no frivolous additions. Learn the voice of the Shepherd, so you can follow after Him, not be led astray. So that His word might stand unadulterated in our midst.

And what for? For the Cross! For the Cross! For the Cross! Because when it is shrouded by something that we must do, or muster, or decide, we are robbed of its comfort. If we must earn salvation we are either left prideful thinking we are better than we are, or left despairing because we cannot and never will measure. So we cut out such notions and look to the cross saying: “his word, his call, his work, done right there!” And done for you. And then our sinful hearts and minds reply, “But I doubt, but I fear, but I sin, but I’m apathetic.” And we say, “Of course you are and do! That’s why you need the Cross!” That’s why we place it in front of you, front and center. Every week. If there was no doubt, no fear, no sin, no apathy, why would he do suffer that death? He went to the cross to cut those tumors out of you.

The cross is our hope that we are no longer slaves to our sin or our frail fears. The cross is how the Lord presents you as a spotless and free child of God. And, as our Lord reminds us today, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

For so long people like us have been slaves to sins, evil, and fear. And if that wasn’t enough false teaching adds on them demands, do this, don’t do that, or tries some game of lies to convince you that you of yourself are good enough. You’ve heard it, they say, “That isn’t a sin, don’t worry.” They say, “All paths lead the same place.” We ask once more, “Then why did Christ need to go the cross?”

Don't stand for any teaching that hides the cross. On reformation day we celebrate the shroud being pulled down so the cross would stand front and center. Let us continue in that tradition, pulling down every addition to the Word of Jesus, pulling down anything in our hearts and minds that would seek to cover up Jesus. Because He is our only Hope, the only true God and Savior, the firstborn of the dead and only the righteousness he offers us freely, is sufficient for Salvation. Thanks be to God we have it through faith that we might be brave and celebrate his victory with him and all the faithful here and in his kingdom. Amen.