

Reformation Day 2023

Reformation Day is an odd day to celebrate I will admit. It's odd, because, in a very real sense, the reformation brings about division into God's Church. And critics will say it opened the door for any number of subsequent divisions.

Because, let's remember: There is only one true Church, capital C, and it is all believers in Jesus as Crucified and Risen God and Savior, across all denominations and over all labels. And yet that one Church has many churches that confess various things and the reformation brought about a division in that confession. That is not good. May we pray for unity in Christ's Church.

But on what basis? Because it must be said that it is also a grievous thing that very real untruths and fabrications were being taught to the people of God. That isn't good. That is sin. So what are we to do in this broken world and a Church full of sinners?

Some say we should, for the sake of unity, gloss over the differences - as long as we agree on the big things, that's enough right? But, first of all, is that true unity at all? Or a facade and mask of unity? Which is no true unity at all.

Furthermore, like a flock of sparrows that block the sun, can enough "little things" begin to shroud the cross of Christ?

Consider the life of a 1500s farmer. We know that the year of 1517 had bad weather, so the crops were bad. We know that inflation was high in Germany and it was hurting the people. So right around this time of year, the fall, with a chill in the air no doubt, the farmers were sitting down to see if they could last the winter on the income from their crops. And it was tight. And now you had to give 10 percent to the Church. And maybe you could still get by...

But then again your dad was sick. And this little teaching of purgatory, a bitter place where you are purged of your sin, creeps in and the farmer is worried that their father, when he dies, might have to go there, for God and the Pope only knows how long, until he is able to go to heaven.

And so Father Tetzel comes to town and preaches about a little thing called indulgences, "A coin in the coffer clings, and a soul from purgatory springs." And so you are already hard pressed and here is the Church to save you, IF you pay a little. And, folks, this is REAL. I have seen a tetzel indulgence at the St. Louis Sem library, it had blanks for you to fill in the names of who you bought them for.

And if you wonder why the people would fall for such things that aren't in the bible, well, it's because they couldn't read it! Part of that is that books were hard to come across, but also because the clergy said, "it was too complicated for the laity." To compound the problem the services were in Latin, which, lets be real, the German peasant probably knew more Latin than us, but I'm not sure how much they were getting out of the sermon.

Which left the people angry. "The bones of the apostles lay uncovered! Give to the Church!" And the people thought, "Why doesn't the pope cover them if he's so nice - he's far richer than us!" And God was a tyrant, "It wasn't my fault I was born poor, it's yours God. It wasn't my fault the crops were bad, it's yours God for sending the bad weather! Give me a break."

And so now our farmer has to make a pilgrimage to the next town's monastery to venerate a few splinters from Jesus' cross to make up for the bitter thoughts he has been having.

And do you see how the little things begin to shroud the cross? To block out the grace of God?

Now, they would say: Jesus earned all that grace in the treasury by his work (and, ok a few saints too) - Ok, Jesus earned the grace, great, but he doesn't want to give it out? You have to weasel it out of him?

And so the little things have now shrouded the mercy of Jesus to pour out his blood for free for the world, and turned him into the miserly overseer that we have to manipulate.

And so the farmer goes to bed and says a hail Mary, because he thinks she's nicer than Jesus, and if *that* is Jesus, I can't blame him. Just a "little thing."

And don't you see how this goes beyond merely the theological? This is real people with real sicknesses and cares and struggles and sins, who are robbed of their comfort in the gracious promises of God.

And so on reformation day we don't celebrate a division, we mourn division. We celebrate the proclamation of the Gospel, whenever it is proclaimed and wherever it is proclaimed to troubled souls that might find refuge in the Cross and Empty tomb of Jesus that is FOR THEM and for free.

And that is worth celebrating. Because folks look around! Wars, shootings, hurricanes. That was just this week! We beget children and we bring them into a world that, "just a few little things", does not know who they are, does not know where they came from, or where they are going. We live in a world that is so "advanced" that our screens are sucking the joy out of life, depression is hitting younger and younger and more and more. The political sphere is toxic, our relationships are more distant and unforgiving than ever. And we flee for refuge in our medicines except that some can't afford them and others have to wait for a panel to approve them. And why does it matter, in the end it all decays and dies. You do, I do, the children do.

What do we have to defend our hope in the face of such despair? You can't run from it, you can't, death WILL get you. You can't beat it. Not the richest, not the strongest, not the smartest.

You can't ignore it, not for long at least.

So what can we do? We can stand and face it, and do so equipped with the Hope of the Gospel That's it. That's it. We can do nothing else.

And so Luther stood before the holy roman emperor and did not recant his writings. He didn't try to fight, or run, he stood there. But he did not stand alone, "God help me." he said. Can we, Christians, be a people who, while chaos boils around us, while the people cry and panic and give into despair or madness, and hide vainly under tables. Can we be brave, can we stand in the breach and look at the despair of the world and defy it? Let me tell you, if we have to earn grace, I don't know. If we have to manipulate God into his aid and care. I don't know.

But If Jesus is the one who, out of pure love for the unloveable (you and me), stood in the breach between us and the righteous justice of God for sin. And If he is risen, and if his blood is yours, if his righteousness is yours, if his grace is for you, if his love and concern is upon you, and if his work is for your eternal and lasting good - then yes, then yes we can.

And on reformation day we celebrate because we have heard the promise that it is for us. It is for the World, and we have been called, claimed in the waters. Jesus is yours.

Come on cancer, come on pain, come on darkness, come on winds and waves, come on strained relationships, come on death, give us your worst. We stand in the

breach, we stand not alone, but with the death of death, the life of the world, with the love, care, deliverance and grace of the omnipotent and merciful God. If he is for us, who can be against us? God be praised.