

Dear friends in Christ,

Today is Reformation Day. It is a day when we remember and celebrate the Lutheran Reformation that was launched on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Please don't misunderstand what today's celebration is about. This isn't Independence Day for the Lutheran church. This isn't our July 4th celebration. Luther never wanted to start a new church or to break off from the Catholic church. His desire was to change the church... to restore it to the true teachings of Scripture. It's a sad and unfortunate thing that such a change could not be made to the church and that a separate church had to be formed. So we're not celebrating that.

Neither is today about acknowledging or exalting a man named Martin Luther. Martin Luther never wanted it to be about him. When it was suggested that the church be called "Lutheran", Luther was strongly against it. He knew that he was a sinful man with many faults. The church should not be named for him, but for Christ. But after his death, the name Lutheran stuck anyway. So we're not celebrating the man, Martin Luther, either.

So what is this service about? The celebration today is simply this: The true gospel of Jesus Christ was restored. The church of Luther's day had largely lost the following truths: We are saved by grace alone. (The cause of our salvation is in God and his love, not in us.) We are saved by faith alone. (Merely relying upon Christ and his work sets us in a right relationship with God... not our works.) We are saved by Christ alone. We are saved through the truth and teaching of Scripture alone. And that last one is our primary focus today. If we have the true gospel... if we are not deceived and hold it true and proclaim it right... we have the power of God for salvation! And so the message today is **"The True Gospel Must be Proclaimed!"**

The following words of Jesus were spoken not all that long... days (or maybe even hours) before his suffering and death on the cross. There was an urgency about Jesus' words for this reason. But Jesus gives a context which also adds urgency. The context is the end of the world. It's coming. So listen!

Mark 13:5-11

5 Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. 6 Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 8 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

9 "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. 10 And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. 11 Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

1. Defense: Watch out. Be on your guard. **True** gospel

What is Jesus teaching? As you see the signs of the end drawing near. You have to be at the top of your game! Being at the top of your game means playing good defense and good offense. First, Jesus says play good defense.

Jesus warns us of Satan's, the enemy's plan. One word: deception. Satan hates God and he hates you. His goal is to get you to lose faith, break your connection to God and despair of God. How can he accomplish this? Well, what creates faith and strengthens faith is the Word of God. Romans 1:16 says, "[The gospel] is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." And Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." So here it is: The Holy Spirit is the one who gives you faith and connects you to Jesus. It is your connection to Jesus that gives you life. He takes your sin and guilt and you enjoy full and free forgiveness and salvation. What does the Holy Spirit use to create and strengthen that faith in Christ? The Word of God! It is the tool of the Spirit which converts and renews.

So Satan's strategy is extraordinarily simple. (After all, the best plans are the simplest ones): 1) Keep people from hearing the Word of God. He knows full well: No word. No faith. But it's impossible to entirely keep people from hearing the Word because pesky Christians keep proclaiming it, sharing it with neighbors, broadcasting it on the airwaves, preaching it from pulpits. He knows he can never silence God's Word, so where he cannot, strategy two 2) is this: deceive those who hear the word. Distort it. Change it. Skew it. Send false teachers who mix God's truth with lies.

Mix a healthy portion of God's truth with just a little bit of lies and you get a toxic mixture that can weaken or even destroy saving faith in Christ.

ILLUS: Maybe this will help: Have you heard in the news about the outbreak of fungal meningitis? So far 404 people have been infected and 29 people have been killed. But this fungal infection did not come from the environment. Patients were unknowingly injected with the stuff. People with back pain received an injectable steroid that relieves back pain ... a good thing! But the steroid was tainted with the fungal meningitis. This change to a good substance resulted in something that brings death.

Likewise, the pure word of God is powerful to save, and heal and give life. But when it is tainted, changed, distorted or corrupted in any way, it can become deadly. And I can even tell you the most common way Satan taints God's truth. If you know what tainted "gospel" looks like you'll better be able to identify it. Satan simply does this: He takes the true gospel good news which says you are saved by grace, through faith in Christ alone... not by your works or deeds or performance... he takes that good news and he adds some element that you must contribute for salvation. Christ didn't quite do it all, he lies. You must... (and what comes next can be almost anything!) You must do so many good works, or this type of good work. You must make a decision to accept Christ in your heart. You must... you must... you must.... Satan wants you to believe that in order to stand before God in heaven on Judgment day and be accepted into paradise, Christ alone is insufficient. Christ's sacrifice is incomplete. You will have to point to Christ plus something additional you have done to warrant your salvation. This is the big lie and it can take many different forms!

But it all comes down to this: Is a teacher of the Word directing you somehow to yourself for salvation? Or is all attention, credit and direction going to Christ crucified? Any attention drawn from Christ to you (or anything else) is a deception from the devil.

So Jesus says:

Watch out that no one deceives you. And that's why Jesus warns: "**Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. You must be on your guard.**" So again, Jesus tells you to play good defense. Do so by *expecting* that you will hear false teaching. Listen for it! Discern. Many will come with lies and deception!

I would suggest to you that one of the biggest problems facing the Christian church today is the lack of discernment among believers. I think many today have not sufficiently heeded Jesus warning to watch out and be on our guard. There is far more false teaching and deception within the Christian church than most people realize.

So here's what this looks like. Let's say there is a bestselling Christian book out there, and a lady from work recommends it and then a relative talks about it too. So you buy the book and read it. Okay, no problem so far. That's fine. I have no problem with that. But understand this: just because the book is found in the Christian section of the bookstore does not mean that it is all true teaching from God. Jesus is not pleased when we drop all filters and read that book assuming that all that is said there is true. God wants us to discern. To test. To evaluate. To be on the look out. To watch. To be on guard! Every concept presented a God's truth must be evaluated. Is this really what God says? Is this really all the truth of God?

The end of the world is coming! There are many deceivers! Play good defense to stay in the game! But we know a good defense is not sufficient. You need an offense too. And that is why Jesus says: **“And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.”** The word “preached” reminds you of what I'm doing. But the Greek word really means, “proclaim!” The gospel must be proclaimed to the nations. It is not sufficient to hold to the truth and just save ourselves. There is a whole world of deceived and dying people out there. The time is short. The end is near. So God tells us to go on the offensive and proclaim the true gospel to the world.

The world for you means first of all the part of the world with which you have contact. It means proclaiming the true gospel of salvation by faith through Christ alone to the people we know and have contact with. Friends, the gospel is God's power Word through which the Holy Spirit works to create faith and change eternal futures. God has entrusted that mighty, powerful word to you! Will use it? Or will you hide it?

So, “the world” for you means first your co-workers who don't know the true gospel. The people in your neighborhood. Your relatives. Your acquaintances. Will you proclaim the true, life-saving news of Jesus to someone you know this week? Will you go on the offensive for the kingdom of God, knowing that time is short, and introduce them to Christ, or invite them to church, or arrange a meeting where I can talk to them... maybe at a neutral site, like your home or a coffee shop? What can you do today to proclaim to the nations?

We start with the part of the world we know and personally proclaim the true gospel. But God asks us to do more than that. We can be instrumental in sharing the gospel even beyond our personal sphere of influence. Through your prayers and offerings, you can support missionaries in North America and around the world. These are people who go in your name and with your support to reach people beyond your sphere of influence. So support them generously! This the reason that when offerings are given to our general budget, almost 1/10th of that offering is sent to the WELS so that we can pool our money with other congregations to start new churches in North America, and around the world.

Friends, time is short. The true gospel must be proclaimed. We keep it true by always being on our guard and evaluating carefully the words of those who claim to speak from God. WE need to be in the world and know the word. Be discerning because false teachers are arising all around us, just as Jesus said they would. But we also must go on the offensive. Boldly proclaim the truth of the gospel to those you know by sharing, loving them, and inviting them. Proclaim the truth around the world with your offerings. On this Reformation Day, let us grasp and share the divine truth that gripped Martin Luther with a passion: **The True Gospel Must Be Proclaimed!**