

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle
Festival of the Reformation
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Grace Lutheran Church, Wichita
Matthew 11:12-19

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

The wisdom of our world says that if the tv doesn't work, hit it.
Shake the gumball dispenser.
Kick the vending machine.
If the piece doesn't fit, then make it fit.
 Get the job done.
 By any means necessary.
 Just do it.

That's how we go through this life.

Everything comes by force.
Every kingdom presses on this way.

Caesar crossed the Rubicon and entered Rome not by persuasive words, but a powerful army.
Napoleon, Hitler, the Spanish Armada, American and RAF pilots—all of these came by force.
The strongest and smartest and most effective win.
And the victor writes the history.

That's the way and wisdom of this world.
The kingdoms of the earth forcefully press on. They stop for no one.
They fight and conquer, they intimidate and destroy.
And we want to be just like them—clothed in strength, respected by all.

But that's not how it is with the kingdom of heaven.
Our Gospel today says most clearly,

“The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (Mt 11:12).

Now what sort of kingdom is that?
Who wants to join the losing team?
Why be a part of a kingdom that suffers,
 that is attacked and oppressed from every side?
And what sort of God would have a kingdom like that as His own?

Well, certainly not a God who wants to be known by His power and force.
This God, the God who's kingdom suffers violence and the violent take it by force,
 is the God who wants to be known for His weakness, for His humility, for His suffering.

This is the God who refuses to be known by His sword and army,
 but by His cross and suffering and death.

“The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”

When Jesus speaks these words in Matthew's Gospel, He speaks them to those who know and have followed John the Baptist.

Just before our reading in Matthew 11, John is in prison.

His preaching has led Herod to bind him in the prison cell.

He's had enough of John's mouth.

So from prison, John sent a couple of his disciples to see whether this Jesus really is the Christ, or if they should expect another.

It's a good question.

Even though John is the one who stretched out his bony finger, proclaiming:

“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”—

even though it was John, who having baptized Jesus, saw

“the heavens ripped open, and the Spirit descending like a dove, and a voice from Heaven cry:

This is My beloved Son!”—

even despite all the miracles and healings the feeding and the raising of the dead,

John was in prison.

And the Pharisees were already talking—

already plotting and scheming and raging on with their murderous thoughts.

There was suffering.

Are you really the one?

Could this really be the kingdom?

It sure doesn't look like it.

And he's right.

Looking at Jesus, you'd never know you were looking at the Kingdom of Heaven.

Just look at the way He hangs on that cross.

Look at his weak arms, out of joint and frail.

Look at that crown that pierced his scalp, and the blood that soaked the dirt below.

Look at his bones, you can count them.

He was despised and rejected—a worm and not a man.

That doesn't look like any kingdom that has ever made it in this world.

Where's the power?

Where's the glory?

Where's the army?

Where's the fighting and conquering and boasting and success?

And that's Jesus' point in the Gospel today.

The glory of Christ is seen on the cross—it's hidden under suffering.

“The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”

While John was locked up for his preaching and eventually had his head lopped off—
 so also would Jesus be tried and mocked and whipped and crucified.

Jesus *is* the Kingdom of Heaven.

He suffers violence, not only at the hands of violent men like Pilate and the Sanhedrin,
 but also the violence due to the sins of the world.

He suffers the violent wrath of God against sin.

He bears the judgment of all.

Never has such violence ever been seen or felt.

And that's our kingdom.

That's our glory.

This Jesus, God in the flesh for us, is the Kingdom of Heaven who suffers violence for us.

However, you can be sure that if you are in Christ, you will suffer too.

The Church suffers.

She suffers attacks from the Devil constantly.

He won't leave her alone.

He brings jealousy and discord, false doctrine, and self-trust as often and as fiercely as he can.

A favorite of his is to convince the Church that she should be like the kingdoms of this world.

She should be glorious;

she should be successful and rich and powerful and effective.

She should force her way and by any means necessary, advance the kingdom.

And the more Satan plants that seed in your ear—

that you should see clear signs of prosperity and success and advancement—

the more he is able to lure you away from the suffering Church.

And to lure you away from the suffering Church is to lure you away from the suffering Christ.

And to be apart from this Christ crucified, is to be apart from God Himself.

Because that's how God wants to be known.

Admittedly, this isn't a very winsome message that our Lord gives us on Reformation day!

Rather than promising converts success and wealth and happiness,

we promise the cross.

The Church is full of this cross, full of suffering.

She suffers the attacks of others, and she suffers from her own sin.

The Church suffers from her own backstabbing and anger and jealousy and pride and gossip.

She suffers from false teachers and from not knowing the faith well enough to defend it.

She suffers from disunity and a lack of love.

And yet she is the Church.

She is the bride of Christ.

She is His body.

The two have become one flesh, so she is the Kingdom of Heaven, and so she suffers violence.

But in the midst of her suffering, when the violent take her by force, she suffers with hope.

Hope in the 3rd day, in the resurrection of Christ and of all the faithful.

Hope in the life to come the stripping away of all sin.

Hope in the word of promise—

that even though what we see is the cross and suffering,

the reality is a victory already won by Christ for us.

All is finished.

All is won.

All is ours, by God's grace alone.

But for now, the Church waits.

She suffers.

She trusts in Christ alone.

She looks to the suffering servant.

And she sings.

She sings hymns of the church militant, even *A Mighty Fortress*.

And even we suffer, even though all things might be taken from us here in this life:

Were they to take our house,

Goods, honor, child, or spouse,

Though life be wrenched away,

They cannot win the day.

The Kingdom's ours forever!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit