

Mark 13:5-13

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today we are celebrating the Reformation. That can be a good thing, or it can be a bad thing. It's a bad thing if all the Reformation is to us is an opportunity to brag, to say, "Luther was right and everyone else was wrong and we are Lutherans so that makes us right too." That's a bad thing because people who brag that way usually have no idea what Luther was right about and what others had wrong. People who brag about being Lutheran are often trusting in a name, or in tradition, but don't know much about what's really in the Bible. They fail to realize that if Luther were still around today he would give them a good tongue lashing and refuse to let them use his name.

Celebrating the Reformation is a good thing if it means that we are reminded again of the basic truths of the Scripture that God used Luther to dust off and bring out of the shadows where they had been hidden. Celebrating the Reformation is a good thing if reviewing the life of Luther inspires us to do what Jesus encourages us to do this morning: "Be On Your Guard". There will be false teachers. You will face persecution.

Jesus warned his disciples and us to **watch out that no one deceives us**. He said that there would be MANY who would try to deceive us. There would be many who would claim to be sent by him, even claim to be Christ, but they would be false teachers, false prophets.

Luther experienced a fulfillment of these words of Jesus in his day. The thing that helped Luther realize this was the sale of indulgences in his area. Tetzel, the head of the sale of indulgences in the Wittenberg area, was telling people that if they would buy an indulgence, the extra good works that the saints had done, which were more than they needed to earn their way to heaven, would be credited to them, or if they wanted, to one of their relatives who had died. In this way, just by the purchase of a piece of paper, they could shorten their stay in Purgatory.

As Luther studied the Bible, he came to realize that this was false teaching. The Bible clearly teaches that when a person dies their soul goes either to heaven or hell. There is no intermediate place called Purgatory. And, the Bible clearly teaches that a person is saved by grace through faith, and not by works. The good works of those in heaven are not what saved them, nor can the church claim to save up the good works of some people and then give them to others, especially not for a price!

Luther objected to the sale of indulgences. He thought that Tetzel was just an over zealous monk trying to raise money and that if the church leaders and the Pope knew what he was doing they would stop him. To his surprise, the church leaders and the Pope approved of what Tetzel was doing. In fact, Luther discovered that the church was fulfilling the warning of Jesus about false Christs when it made the claim that the person in the office of the Papacy is the Vicar of Christ on earth. He is Christ's stand in who can speak with the same authority as Jesus himself.

Since the days of Luther false teachers and false Christs have certainly multiplied. Today there are all kinds of sects, and cults, and false Christs. Jesus wasn't kidding when he said that there would be many who would try to deceive us, and many have been deceived. Many people have been led to believe the lie that it doesn't really matter much what you believe as long as you are a good person and go to some kind of church or religious organization at least once in a while. But Jesus warned us about being deceived because believing the wrong thing will cost you eternal life. It is only those who stand firm till the end that will be saved.

How do you keep from being deceived? With so many voices calling out to us claiming to have the truth, it isn't easy. The temptation is to throw up our hands and think, "I give up. I can't tell who is right and who is wrong". But the Apostle John encourages us not to give up. He

encourages us to **test the spirits to see if they really are from God**, if they really are telling us the truth. And there is only one way to test the spirits. There is only one way to keep from being deceived. That's to do what Luther did. Study the Scriptures for yourself. Each person is responsible to do that for themselves. Each one of us needs to know what the Scriptures say. We need to be determined to hold on to the principle of Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone. If it's not taught in the Scriptures it is not from God. If it contradicts the Scriptures it is not from God. If someone says that you need to add something they have said or written to what the Scriptures say, they are not from God. They are trying to deceive you. The Scriptures tell us everything we need to know for salvation and life. As the rich man in Hell was told, all his brothers needed for salvation was right there in the Scriptures. **They have Moses and the prophets, let them listen to them.**

The Bible is very clear. Salvation is in Jesus alone. **There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.** Jesus tells us that he is the only way, truth and life, **no one comes to the father except through me.** The message of both the Old and New Testaments is the same. All people are sinful and deserve God's wrath and punishment, no matter how many good things they do. The only way of salvation is through faith in the Messiah, Jesus, who offered himself as a sacrifice of atonement for all people, and proved that he is the only source of salvation by his resurrection from the dead on the third day. As Luther studied his Bible the Holy Spirit enabled him to see through the deception of false teachers and false christs and to believe, teach and confess boldly that it is **by grace that we are saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

Luther also experienced another fulfillment of the words of Jesus in his life. He found out that when you stand with Jesus on the basis of Scripture proclaiming the truth and pointing out error, you will be persecuted.

Not long after Jesus ascended to heaven Peter and John were arrested by the Sanhedrin. They were warned not to keep proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah who rose from the dead. When they refused to be silent they were beaten and imprisoned and James, the brother of John, was executed. After the stoning of Stephen, Saul began persecuting the church and many Christians fled Jerusalem—but God turned this persecution into good as those Christians shared the good news about Jesus wherever they went, and Jesus appeared to Saul and when he became a Christian he became the greatest missionary the church has known. He became part of the fulfillment of Jesus' words as he claimed in his letter to the Colossians that the Gospel **was bearing fruit all over the world and that it was being proclaimed to every creature under heaven.** He became part of the fulfillment of Jesus' words as he was arrested and imprisoned. As a result of his arrest and trials he had the opportunity to proclaim the gospel before the Sanhedrin, before the governors Felix and Festus, before King Agrippa, and before the courts in Rome so that even some of the members of Caesar's household became Christians.

As a reward for standing on the Scriptures alone and proclaiming salvation by grace alone through faith, Luther was summoned to appear before the emperor and the leaders of the church. The deck was stacked against him. He would be asked to recant, or take back everything he had written in his books, to declare it all to be false, or to be declared an enemy of both the church and the state. He asked for some time to prayerfully consider their request. As he prayed he may have remembered these words of Jesus. **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. "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."**

When he returned to the meeting at Worms he spoke these famous words. *"Unless I am convinced by the teaching of Holy Scripture or by sound reasoning . . . I am tied by the Scriptures I have quoted and by my conscience. I cannot and will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. (Here I stand. I can do no other.) God Help me! Amen"*

As you and I look at the words of Jesus and we see wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes and growing hatred of anyone who dares to stand on Scripture and call something sinful or proclaim that Jesus is the only way of salvation, we need the encouragement to be on our guard. We constantly need to be studying our Scriptures so that we are not deceived by the many false teachers that exist in our day. We constantly need to be studying our Scriptures, continuing to grow stronger in our faith, so that if persecution does come to us and we stand before judges and authorities, we see it as Peter and John and Paul and Luther saw it, as an opportunity to proclaim the truth, even if that proclamation brings confiscation of property, loss of job, prison or even death. Remember what Jesus said, **all men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.**

Celebrating Reformation can be a good thing. It is a good thing to be reminded of the truth that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Jesus. It is a good thing to be reminded that we need to study the Scriptures so that we are not deceived. It is a good thing to be reminded that if we stand up for the truth we can expect some to hate and persecute us so we better be ready. It is a good thing to be reminded that it is not being called Lutheran or belonging to "the right church" that saves, it is only those who trust in Jesus who will be saved.

Be on your guard. Study the Scriptures every day so that you can recognize false teaching when you see or hear it. Study the Scriptures every day so that the Holy Spirit can make you strong enough to withstand any kind of persecution that might come your way. Be on your guard because only those who stand firm to the end will be saved.