WHY WE STILL NEED REFORMATION SUNDAY
Saint Matthew 11:15

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (St. Matthew 11:15).

Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it says our Lord. But Martin Luther had not heard the Gospel, for the Gospel was not being preached in the church of his youth. It was not as though the Gospel was completely absent from the Roman Catholic Church of the late Middle Ages. It could be found in the great evangelical canticles of the liturgy – the Gloria in Excelsis, the Sanctus, and the Agnus Dei. The Scriptures were still read in the Mass. Yet the Gospel itself had been twisted into law as people were taught that they had “to do what was in them” to be saved. And who could ever be sure that he had done enough?

The preachers of Luther’s youth had exhorted him to become pious. Yet the more Luther attempted to live the pious life, the more he recognized the potency of the sin within his own flesh. The constant possibility of death and with death the terrifying judgment of a wrathful God, pushed Luther to despair. Luther himself admits “I was never able to be consoled about my baptism. How (I thought) can a person become pious even once? And so I became a monk” (Siggins, “Luther and the Catholic Preachers of Luther’s Youth, Luther: Theologian for Catholics and Protestants, 69). But being a monk brought Luther no comfort. Luther found that he could not check his sinful flesh at the door of the monastery; the monk’s cell was not off limits for the devil or the Law. Luther could not attain to the contrition which he had been taught was demanded by God – “an unalloyed sorrow, purged even of the fear of loss, evoked only by desire for God” (Siggins, 69). How could he or anyone else love such a God who demanded the impossible? Unable to do what God required, Luther grew to hate God. Through his mentor and father confessor, Johann von Staupitz, Luther was finally convinced that he was looking in the wrong place for God’s mercy – he was looking within himself. Staupitz directed Luther away from himself and to the sweet wounds of the Lord Jesus Christ. But Luther was not there yet.

The Augustinian order of which Luther was a member directed him to take his doctorate and become a lecturer in Bible at a new university in Wittenberg. As he lectured on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, Luther comes to see that the phrase he had come to hate, “the righteousness of God” indicated not God’s judgement and wrath, but rather God’s redeeming work to save us. Luther came to see that God’s righteousness as a gift which God gives to sinners for the sake of Jesus’ suffering and death to be received by faith. Now the words of the Apostle Paul begins to shine: “We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom 3:28).

What Luther had heard from the Scriptures, he now begins to confess. That confessing brings Luther into conflict with the Roman Church. Little could he have imagined on that chilly last afternoon of October in 1517, what an explosion was about to be created as he nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The church door, in those days, was something like a community bulletin board and Luther posted his 95 Theses, a set of propositions for academic discussion and debate.

Luther prepared those Theses for he was a doctor of the church, charged with the church’s health. From his study of the Scriptures, Luther had come to see that the church had no right to sell indulgences which supposedly were to free people from torment in purgatory. Indulgences might help built the Sistine Chapel in Rome, but they could never build God’s kingdom. Luther called it “the pious defrauding of the faithful.” He could not square the
exhortation of John Tetzel, that “short, dumpy, stump-preacher” (Kittelson, 103) with the words of the Apostle Paul. Reformation historian, James Kittelson describes the tactics of Tetzel:

“Do you not hear the voices of your dead relatives and others crying out to us and saying, ‘Pity us, pity us, for we are in dire punishment and torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance? And you will not? Finally there was the appeal: “Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive these letters of indulgences through which you are able to lead a divine and immortal soul safely and securely into the homeland of paradise? A money chest, a supply of blank indulgences, a scale to make certain that the people’s coins were good, and the scribes were ready and the in their places. Then came Tetzel’s last exhortation: “Once the coin into the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs!” (Kittelson, Luther the Reformer, p. 103-104).

Luther attacks this aberrant practice, but as time goes on his listening to the Scriptures leads him to see that the indulgence business is only a symptom of the real sickness. Listening to the Scriptures, Luther came to see that at the heart of all that was wrong with the Church of Rome was the loss of the Gospel that sinners are justified by grace through faith for Christ’s sake alone. Luther had ears to hear. He had ears to hear and the also had a mouth which to confess. And confess he would. Four years after he mailed the 95 Theses to the church door, Luther would confess the Gospel at the Diet of Worms saying “Here I stand.” That confession would result in Luther’s excommunication from the Roman Church. Now an outlaw and under the threat of death, Luther kept on confessing. You know the heart of his confession from the Small Catechism:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the virgin Mary is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His Kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

On Reformation Sunday, we give thanks to God that He opened Martin Luther’s ears to hear the voice of the Gospel, which is the living voice of the crucified and risen Lord Himself and we give thanks that He opened Luther’s lips to speak, that is, to confess the truth which he heard in the Holy Scriptures. But there is more to Reformation Sunday than the retelling of the story of Luther’s struggle. We still need the Reformation for the sake of the everlasting Gospel.

We might laugh at the antics of Tetzel and the selling of indulgences as a crass case of commercialized religion, but the spirit of Tetzel is alive and well even as we speak. Tetzel lives on in those TV evangelists who promise you “health and wealth” if you’ll buy their prayer cloths or make a “faith offering” to their program. The spirit of Tetzel lives on in those who preach that “in God’s Kingdom, you GIVE in order to get your CAPTIAL” (Horton, The Agony of Deceit, p. 245). The Gospel is transformed from the free gift of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Christ to a religious product to be marketed to meet the felt needs of the consumer. We still need the Reformation.

We still need the Reformation and we will continue to need the Reformation as long as the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is threatened by claims that human beings have something to contribute to salvation. We still need the Reformation for the Roman Church persists in teaching that faith in Christ alone is insufficient for salvation, it must be supplemented with
works of love. But the problem is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church. We will continue to need the Reformation as long as there are churches that confuse “self-esteem” with the righteousness which we have in the blood of Jesus Christ. We will continue to need the Reformation as long as there are people who confuse humanly-devised spirituality with saving faith in Jesus Christ. We will continue to need the Reformation as long as there are churches that substitute entertainment for the edification that God gives in the pure preaching of His Word and the right administration of His Sacraments.

We need the Reformation as long as we live in this world of sin and death where there are wars and rumors of war, there are tsunamis and fires that take house and home. For finally it is only the Gospel of the Reformation that enables us to sing with confidence and boldness staring down the throat of death and looking the old evil foe straight in the face: “And take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife; though these all be gone, our victory has been won. The Kingdom ours remaineth.” That kingdom belongs to the crucified King, Christ Jesus. Violent men cannot wrest it from His nail pierced hands. Hungry flames cannot overcome His kingdom. Nothing in all of creation can separate you from His love. That is the message Luther gave his days to proclaim. He preached Christ who as he once said is with us even in the sewer, so close to us sinners as our Brother and Savior that even His skin smokes!

The Reformation did not stop with Luther. It goes on today and it must go on until the Lord Jesus Christ returns in glory to bring history to an end and to gather His little flock into His heavenly Kingdom. In the meantime, we press on holding fast to the Word of Life, rejoicing that we belong to Christ Jesus. The kingdom ours remaineth! God grant us ears to hear and hearts to believe that Gospel for Jesus’ sake.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.