

He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear
Matthew 11:12-19

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen*.

What is a Lutheran? Many of us have been asked this question, and it's often a challenge figuring out how best to answer. There are many valid ways to approach the subject. You might talk about Reformation History, and the divide between the Romans and the Lutherans in the 16th century. You might talk about the Reformation *solas*: scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone. For a deeper dive, you might consider discussing how we subscribe to the Book of Concord unconditionally *because* it is a faithful exposition of God's Word. Another good idea is to explain our methodology, how we view Scripture as the Word of God, accepting what God says and neither adding to it, removing from it, or using our reason to change its meaning.

There are, of course, unwise ways to answer, and one would be saying that as Lutherans, we're "not Roman Catholics". Certainly, it's true, we are not Roman Catholic. But to see what we are not as our identity is unhelpful. As we commemorate the Reformation, we are not celebrating a triumphant independence day. We are not celebrating the fact that we are not Roman Catholic. Indeed, if breaking from authority were what we were celebrating, as many non-Lutherans think Reformation Day is about, we would end up believing the lie that the essence of Lutheranism is believing whatever you feel like and rejecting all forms of authority. We would become guilty of what our friends in Rome accuse us of doing: making ourselves the authority over Scripture and declaring that nobody can tell us what it means except ourselves.

The question remains, then. What *are* we commemorating? And how does that inform us about who we are? We do well to turn to God's Word for an answer. "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Mt 11:12-19a). For a short spell, the Jews were willing to rejoice about John. They were excited to have a prophet in their midst once again! But they were unwilling to take him seriously as the Elijah to come. They knew God's promise through His

prophet Malachi: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” (Mal 4:5-6). Yet they were unwilling to accept that John was this prophesied Elijah. They did not appreciate his calls to repentance. The Jews rejected John and Jesus for opposite things. What they demanded of John they condemned in Jesus; what they demanded of Jesus they condemned in John. They didn’t care about the truth; the standard by which they measured John and Jesus was whatever they felt like at the time. And when the reality of God’s kingdom didn’t match what they were hoping for, they rejected it.

This is how our world treats Jesus, too. Those who are willing to grant the Word of God any value are excited only for what they hope to find in it. They are inevitably disappointed by the real thing. People hoping for a guide to make themselves worthy of heaven will be crushed by the words in our epistle: “By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Rom 3:20a). People chasing after the sensation of a worship experience will forsake the pure teaching of the Word of God and search for a new church as they value their own feelings of excitement and fulfillment over the actual truth that is delivered to them. Someone hoping to use Jesus to lend some weight to political ideas will be disappointed that Jesus is more concerned with giving us salvation from sin. To this day I recall a man I met in university who said that he had taken an interest in Christianity, even to the point of almost being baptized, but stopped, because, in his judgment, Jesus had not said enough about women’s rights. “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.” This generation hasn’t changed much. The world continues to be more excited about what they expect or want Jesus to say than what He actually says. And in their disappointment, they turn their backs on Him and search after false Christs and false gods.

Since we are in the world and we, too, are sinners, we are tempted to do the same. We are tempted to look at the Word of God as boring. Repetitive. Something which once made us excited but has lost all its shine. We are tempted to treat the treasure that saves us as little more than a broken trinket, kept for sentimental value alone, left behind on a shelf at home to collect dust. And so, Jesus must call us once more: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mt 11:15). He calls us to use our ears for the purpose God gave them to us. He calls us not to rejoice in His Word for only a short spell, but to take it seriously, to hear it, to understand it, and to receive it in faith.

Through His apostle Paul, Jesus tells us in today’s epistle that all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. There is no distinction. Man, woman, child—all have

sinned. We have sinned. He also tells us that we are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. No boasting is possible. We are not the main characters in this story of the forgiveness of sins. Rather, God is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

It's not flattering. We are the damsel in distress. We were born sinful and unclean. We've sinned our whole lives. We've sinned this past week! We were lost and condemned, sentenced to eternal punishment for our sin. But Jesus purchased and won us from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that we 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. This is what God's Word teaches. Are we willing to accept it? Will we be like the Jews, who rejoiced for a little while at the idea of having a prophet among them, but didn't actually want to take John seriously? Will we look at the priceless Word of God, at the forgiveness of sins, at the promise of salvation and eternal life, and say we don't need it? Will we tell our Lord that we have our own goals right now, and if He won't help with them, He can come back at another time, when we actually want what He's offering?

Or will we use the ears God has given us to do what He wants us to do, to hear and believe His Word, trusting that we need His forgiveness, even if we may not feel it? Trusting that we receive His forgiveness, even though we can never earn it? As God calls us and proclaims His eternal gospel, will we receive it in faith, turning away from our sins and turning instead to Jesus?

Beloved in the Lord, may the way of faith be our way as we commemorate the Reformation. It is not a celebration of independence or the triumphal founding of a *new* church, but a solemn remembrance of God's Gospel call. It is not a casting off of all authorities but a return to the correct authority: God and His Word. The Lutheran Church is not the strong independent woman of western civilization who needs no man, but the bride of Christ who has a faithful husband. And Jesus Christ, this husband, "loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of the water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:25b-27). He cherishes His bride, loving us as Himself, for we are members of His body (cf. Eph 5:29-30). Though we are so often unfaithful, chasing after all the fleeting desires of our hearts, God is faithful. Though the

world and our own sinful nature demand all sorts of things from God that He has not promised while despising the good gifts He does promise, “Wisdom is justified by her deeds” (Mt 11:19b). And Jesus Christ, the true wisdom of God, justifies us by His deeds.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the eternal Gospel which rings out in every faithful Lutheran Church week after week, that according to the will of God, those with ears may hear it and be saved. Is God’s rescue boring to us? Is eternal life draining to us? Then God calls us to repent. Where sinful hearts full of pride deny their sin, deceive themselves, and treat salvation as something they can earn, deserve, delay, or don’t even need, God’s Law crushes us in our sin, that we may know our need for a saviour. Where despairing hearts see how impossible it is to be worthy of salvation, God’s Gospel shows us our saviour in Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life—the only way by which we come to our heavenly Father. And He is not far off, but near. Salvation in Christ is not a mere philosophical concept to be pondered from a distance. Our Lord gathers us week after week to receive what He promises. As His forgiveness is proclaimed, we receive on earth what is given in heaven. As we partake of the bread and the cup, we eat the bread of life and drink the blood of the Son of Man, eating and drinking true food and true drink by which we abide in Jesus, and He in us. It may not always be what excites us, but it is always what we need. If we are willing to accept it, Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. *Amen.*