Text: Matthew 11:12-19

**Introduction**

It is Reformation Day. Well, Reformation Day observed. The actual day is Oct 31st or Halloween. That’s the Day that Luther walked down to the Castle Church and nailed the 95 theses to its door in 1517. Setting aside the United States’ relatively recent glorification of Halloween, that act is the great Romantic act of the Reformation. The Hammer Blows echoing in eternity. Or as the snippet from Revelation would say “an angel with an eternal gospel crying out in a loud voice.”

At some point the Romanticism subsides, and you are forced to look at things in the light of day. I’ve heard those who have done that suggest June 25th as the day we should remember the Reformation. That is the day the Augsburg Confession was presented to emperor Charles V in 1530. That is the day that people started to actually re-form the church. The Zwinglian and Calvinist strains would settle on a confession and catechism around 1560. The Anglican 39 Articles come from 1563. And the Roman Catholic Council of Trent closes the same year 1563. The Old Western Church, which formed in 1064 after the great schism of with the Eastern Church, schisms again. If the hammer blows are the great act of propaganda of the Reformation, The Counter-Reformation’s great propaganda coup is the idea that the Papal church is the continuation of the Old Western Church. All of those churches have claims to the Old West. And all of them re-formed.

If I’m being flippant, you could compare the two dates to Young Elvis and Old Elvis. Do you like skinny Elvis with the swagger in his hips on Hound Dog. Or do you prefer fat Elvis in Vegas crooning Suspicious Minds. There is a more respectable form of that question. Do you like young Luther – striking skinny single monk, or old Luther, heavy grumpy married father. There is a reason that many biographies of Luther just stop in 1521 at the diet of worms. That is roughly the end of the great Romantic. “Here I Stand, God help me.” And if Luther had had the good fortune to die or be killed as they were trying to do, he might have forever been the Romantic hero those biographies want. But he lived. And he had to do the hard work of re-forming things. And romantic heroes rarely survive adulting.

**Text**

There are a couple of gospel texts assigned to Reformation Day, and I’ve always appreciated the one from Matthew. Most Pastor’s will default to the Romans 3 Epistle lesson. That is the text that Luther claimed as his “evangelical breakthrough.” The light-bulb moment of getting the gospel. “We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” And the beats of that sermon move through the solas – grace alone and faith alone. That the Lutheran Church stands or falls on its teaching of the justification of God. That justification of the sinner is not by works. The law stops every mouth. The law holds all of us accountable to God. The law justifies no one. It only gives us knowledge. We are sinners and are receiving our due penalty. But the righteousness of God has been given to us in Christ. That sermon on Romans 3 is the doctrinal one. And most Lutheran preachers are comfortable in the head.

If you’ve had a pure young Luther preacher, he probably didn’t have the guts to use Revelation and the eternal angel as his basis. He already failed his choice. Because if you choose the Romantic revolutionary alone, you should have no problem playing the angel with the loud voice. Today, the eternal gospel comes to you. Today, your hour of judgement has come. Do you worship God and give him the glory, or are you still trying to negotiate a separate peace from the one that Christ has decreed. Your peace is in that cross. Pick it up and walk. Or go your own way to perdition.

You probably haven’t heard that sermon. Although you might have heard the one based on John – the suppressed gospel reading for today – which has the theme of freedom. “If the son sets you free, you are free indeed.” The young Luther fanantic would talk about your freedom in Christ. And that sermon would probably tie the church’s freedom from the ridiculous rules of the papacy to your freedom from sin and death in Christ. And it would all be very stirring. But don’t ask “how then do we live?” Don’t ask freedom for what? The Revolutionary wants freedom, but what comes after is always left unspecified.

And older, heavier, father-like preacher would attempt to say we have been freed to walk in the way God has laid out. We have been freed not for sin, but for love. For the first time in our lives, by the power of the Spirit, we can freely choose to love God and our neighbor. And choosing to do something else is betraying the revolution that bought our freedom. Choosing sin is returning to slavery in Egypt.

The Matthew text though is cryptic. It doesn’t have an easy simplification. It reminds us that God works in this world in two ways. We don’t get to choose only young Luther. But neither do we get to choose only old Luther. God sends John the Baptist. The axe is already at the root of the tree. Who warned you, you pit of vipers, to flee from the coming wrath? The winnowing fork is in his hand and he is going to clear his threshing floor. God will sing the dirge, and the appropriate response is to mourn.

God also sends his son – the Son of Man. And Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus proclaims a kingdom that he is giving you, and yet the violent take that kingdom by force. I appreciate a slightly different translation that Flannery O’Conner stole for the title of a book. The violent bear is away. He plays the flute and we will not dance. How can you dance when the world is ending when the kingdom is under assault. When the wrong people respond?

God speaks in two ways. He speaks to us by the law. And He speaks to us by the Gospel.

**Application**

And the greatest gift in all of creation is to be able to rightly divide the law and the gospel. To have ears to hear. To have been granted by the Spirit some measure of divine wisdom.

Because as the teach or Ecclesiastes says “there is a time for everything.”

There is a time to cast away stones. There is a time for Romantic heroes and young Luther and even Blue Suede Shoes. There is a time the former things have to be put away. There is a time when everything seems up for grabs.

There is also a time to gather stones together. There is a time to re-form. There is a time for old Luther. There is a time to say there is an eternal gospel and that is not up for grabs.

Jesus’ complaint about “this generation” isn’t that they have all gone after the Baptist foolishly. Neither is his complaint that they are following him from party to party. Jesus’ complaint is that they do neither.

Neither a jot or a title of the law will disappear until heaven and earth disappear. And we can always mourn. We can always look into that mirror of the law and repent. We can always take in it’s deep wisdom. But “this generation” too quickly dismisses the law as a demon.

And the angel has an eternal gospel. You are not justified by works of the law. Christ has justified you. And Christ invites you to his table and to the wedding feast. It is a feast that has no end. A feast of rich foods and well aged wine. But “this generation” looks around at who else is here and complains. It looks at who is throwing the feast and thinks this grace profligate and wasted.

Jesus’ complaint about “this generation” is that we do neither. We hear neither the law nor the gospel.

Maybe Luther’s best phrase for “this generation” is “sin boldly.”

Are ours ears perfect at hearing the law and the gospel? Not a chance. Are we always going to apply the law with the Wisdom of Solomon? Not a chance. But going without the law is not an option on this earth or under this heaven. The complaint is not about sinners. The grace of God in Christ is always enough to cover sin. We are all sinners and the gospel is only for sinners. The complaint of Jesus about this generation is those who do nothing. Better to sin boldly.

Which is not about setting out to sin, but knowing that we are going to. The second we act, we probably sin. But we even more we trust in the grace of Christ to forgive us our sin and we forgive. And we trust in him to bring the Kingdom to its goal. Which is to re-form a people for the glory of God. Not a people already perfect, but a people made perfect in faith.