Matthew 11:12-19 – An Eternal Gospel to Proclaim – Reformation – October 25, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

Today—as you know—is Reformation Sunday. The actual date for the commemoration is October 31. We typically slide it back to the Sunday before. This is a uniquely Lutheran festival—one holy day we don't share with the Catholics, the Orthodox, or even the Baptists, typically, although we welcome their participation. And Reformation is all about Jesus. It all about the Gospel.

I want to draw your attention to the stained-glass window on the lectern side—the very first window. You know this one. We see Luther's Rose there—or Luther's Seal. But this isn't the only place we find this image. It is on your *Small Catechism*. It is on the sign out front. It is on my stole and cross. It is on the order-of-service today.

Luther talked about this seal in some detail. And you can find the exact quotation as an appendix in the *Small Catechism*. The black cross reminds us that Jesus died to defeat sin and death. The red heart reminds us of the love of God—and the blood of Christ shed for us and our salvation. The white rose reminds us of the sanctifying and purifying work of the Holy Spirit. The blue background pictures the joy of new life in Christ. A golden ring outlines the seal and points to the glory of eternal life.

The seal on our window is ringed by words central to the theology of the Reformation, "The Word Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone." Now, there were lots of other issues in the 16th Century. There were conflicts over money, politics, hierarchy, philosophy, and literature. And not everything that came out of the Reformation was helpful. Protestants shattered the Church—although that was never Luther's intention.

But a recovery of the Gospel—of the eternal Gospel—as John calls it in our reading from his Revelation today—is the best thing that happened. The Reformation set right the order of salvation. And these three phrases—the Word Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone—help us to talk about the Gospel well. So, our stained-glass window will serve as our guide today.

For most people, this coming weekend is Halloween weekend—costumes, trick-or-treating, candy. And that's fine. We are even hosting a trunk-or-treat this weekend. And it's not too late to get involved. But what people fail to notice is that *Halloween* literally means "the evening before the holy day." Halloween is the Eve of All Saints Day.

Historically, All Saints Day was a central festival in the life of the Church. This was always a big service, Sunday or not. Martin Luther posted his *95 Theses* on the door of the Church in Wittenberg on the Eve of All Saints. And this posting became a key moment in the Lutheran Reformation.

He knew his colleagues would be at the All Saints Service. And he wanted dialogue around his ideas for the Reformation of the Church—moral and theological. And although most today are simply unaware that this is Reformation weekend, we Lutherans allow the Reformation to upstage Halloween.

And so, we turn to the Gospel Reading for Reformation Sunday. I hope you find this reading to be as intriguing as I do. Jesus begins by saying that the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence. In context, this is a reference to John the Baptist, now imprisoned for

announcing God's Word. And soon, he will be executed. And clearly, in the Kingdom of God, he will not be the only one.

This reading was chosen because of the parallels to the 16th Century. There is an historic saying in Lutheranism. The Church stands or falls on the doctrine of justification. This is the central teaching of the Bible. It was the central issue during the Reformation. It is all about salvation. And this teaching often brings a violent response.

In the 15th Century, a hundred years before the Lutheran Reformation, Bohemian reformer John Hus was executed for his view of this doctrine of justification. In the 16th Century, the English-speaking reformer Robert Barnes was executed for the same reason.

Martin Luther himself was threatened by the Roman Empire with execution, and if not for the protection of the German princes, he would have been. A number of his colleagues were martyred. The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence.

Every Lutheran—even every Christian—should have a clear definition of the doctrine of justification. I know it's a big word, but don't let those five syllables get in the way. The Bible uses some big words, and we can handle them—as long as they are properly defined.

Jesus uses this word a few times, but once right here in our Gospel text. Paul uses it constantly—several times even in our short reading from Romans today. The Greek word is tied to other terminology in our English Bible—just, justice, right, righteousness. And, as I said, during the Reformation this was *the* conflict with the Roman Church.

Our own Augsburg Confession, written in 1530, 13 years after the beginning of the Reformation, perhaps says it best.

"Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight."

To justify means "to declare righteous." This is God's sure and certain declaration that we are righteous in His eyes because of our Savior Jesus Christ, and because of Him only. It is as our opening hymn by Martin Franzmann confesses, "Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous, bright with Thine own holiness."

Through His perfect life, Jesus satisfied God's eternal demand for obedience. Through His sacrificial death, Jesus took God's righteous wrath against sin and atoned for the sins of the world. This is justice for the crimes of humanity—and the justification of repentant sinners—all at the same time.

It is as Paul says in our reading from Romans 3, "It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

If God doesn't justify us—if our faith isn't credited to us by God as righteousness—then we will never be able to stand before a holy God. And no amount of time in Purgatory is going to straighten that out. No volunteer hours or big offerings—not even a pilgrimage in the steps of St. Paul—can overcome the guilt of sin. Our best efforts fall so short of the righteous perfection that God's Law requires.

And so the good news is that—because of Christ—His life, death, and resurrection—He has made a way for us to stand in perfection before God. Repentance and faith in Jesus are all that are required. We are justified, we are declared righteous, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as He comes to us in Word and Sacrament alone—all to the glory of God alone. We are saved from sin and eternal death in this way. And we can be saved in no other way.

Apart from His grace, we all face an eternity locked in our sinful natures, separated from God, under His just judgment—an eternity of frustration and regret. And more than just eternity, we are forced to live our whole lives with our own guilt and regret. There is no setting thing right apart from God's intervention in the world in Jesus Christ.

But Jesus did come. Justification is available to us in Him—and in Him alone. Only He can declare us righteous—not guilty. No other religion will get you there. And there are proper responses to such amazing good news. We should be amazed and filled with joy. We should be filled with gratitude and thanksgiving. We should have a passion for the things of God. These are the right responses. It is as Luther says in the Small Catechism, "It is our duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him."

In our Gospel reading, Jesus said, "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.'"

The reference here is once again to John the Baptist and also to Jesus. John the Baptist came talking about a rightly ordered life, and the people found ways not to listen. John was too harsh and direct, and so they said that he was possessed by a demon. Jesus spent time around the table with the outcasts of the world—drawing them out of their lives of sin and decay. But the Pharisees and crowds called Him a drunkard and a friend of sinners.

As a whole, both the Pharisees and the crowds were not looking for this Christ or this kind of Savior. They were looking for something else. They didn't want to be justified. They wanted to justify themselves. They wanted to be affirmed. They wanted credit before God. They only wanted deliverance from their temporal problems—poverty, disease, and the Roman government.

And things are not that different today. Many people today see no need to be justified before God. It is unfair that God has expectations for people to be righteous anyway. They blame God for the problems of the world and their own sinful proclivities. Many don't see a need for a Savior. They just want a job they enjoy, or a lottery win, or a quiet evening. And when we think we deserve everything—there is little room for justification.

It takes a humble heart to admit that we are sinners and in need of a Savior. It takes a repentant heart to admit that our place before God is a scenario we can't fix on our own. It is hard to hear that we messed things up so severely that someone had to die for us. And, indeed, things were so bad that God Himself had to die. We need to be declared righteous before God, pricelessly because we couldn't—and even wouldn't—be righteous on our own.

When the Church proclaims this doctrine of justification, it is easy for our sinful ears to tune it out. Justification is a big theological word, and so we dismiss it as too hard to understand. And then it requires that I admit my guilt. And I don't like feeling guilty. And frankly, it is just easier to think about other things—sports, entertainment, ourselves. We are easily distracted from what matters most. And so we respond with apathy.

It is easy to tune out. We make a big deal out of Halloween, and completely ignore the Reformation. It is easy to think we are good enough and ignore the doctrine of justification. But I invite you to submit to God's Word. I invite you to see that justification is necessary—and even amazingly good news. This is precisely where the Church stands or falls. Right here with this doctrine.

So perhaps we need a little more Reformation. A Reformation of our responses to God. A Reformation in our theology, especially in our understanding of justification. A Reformation that asks us to look away from ourselves and back to Christ.

Indeed, we must admit that the Reformation still calls us back to the Word alone. Back to the Holy Scriptures as our only source and norm for the truth of God. Back to Christ as the world's only Savior—as our only Savior. Back to the doctrine that was so faithfully confessed in the Augsburg Confession. Back to justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And back to Jesus Himself as the one who brings the Kingdom of Heaven to us.

This is what it means to be Lutheran. It is not about a German heritage, or the Church your great-grandparents chose, or liturgically colored Jello. It is about justification. It is about the eternal Gospel.

The Holy Spirit worked through His Word to shine forth the light of the Gospel that salvation is given to sinners by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And through His Word, the Holy Spirit continues to shine forth that same light today.

Lutheranism is a confession—grounded in the Scriptures—and in the Creeds and Confessions of the Church. Lutherans understand and appreciate what Christ has done for us. "Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous, bring with Thine own holiness." This is our doctrine. This is our greatest need. And it is our highest joy. And as Jesus says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+