

Jesu Juva

“What Kind of Fortress?”

Text: Matthew 11:12-19 (Revelation 14:6-7; Romans 3:19-28)

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

A man named Charles Porterfield Krauth paints a picture with words of what it was like to be in Wittenberg that day when Martin Luther posted 95 statements for discussion onto the door of the city church. This is what he writes:

“[Four hundred and ninety-one] years ago, on the 31st of October, immense crowds were pouring into an ancient city of Germany . . . [named Wittenberg]. The weather-beaten and dingy little edifices of Wittenberg forbade the idea, that the beauty of the city or its commercial importance drew the masses to it. Within that city was an old church, very miserable and battered, and very venerable and holy, which attracted these crowds. It was the “Church of all Saints,” in which were shown, to the inexpressible delight of the faithful, a fragment of Noah’s Ark, some soot from the furnace into which the three young Hebrews were cast, a piece of wood from the crib of the infant Saviour, some of St. Christopher’s beard, and nineteen thousand other relics equally genuine and interesting. But over and above all these allurements, so well adapted to the taste of the time, His Holiness, the Pope, had granted indulgence to all who should visit the church on the first of November. Against the door of that church of dubious saints, and dubious relics, and dubious indulgences, was found fastened, on that memorable morning, a scroll unrolled. The writing on it was firm; the nails which held it were well driven in; the sentiments it conveyed were moderate, yet very decided. The material, parchment, was the same which long ago had held words of redemption above the head of the Redeemer. The contents were an amplification of the old theme of glory - Christ on the cross, the only King. The Magna Charta, which had been buried beneath the Pope’s throne, reappeared on the church door. The keynote of the Reformation was struck full and clear at the beginning, Salvation through Christ alone.” (Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*, p. 1-2)

Those words describe not just the situation that existed in Wittenberg on the eve of the Reformation, but also the “violence” spoken of by St. Matthew in the Holy Gospel today. A violence which indeed has been **since the days of John the Baptist**, but even before, and which will be until the end of time. A violence not of sword, army, and blood, but a violence of thoughts, words, and deeds. The violence that **we can gain the Kingdom of Heaven by our own efforts**. That if we can somehow manage to do the right things, the Kingdom of Heaven will be ours. And so with

such thoughts, many people build up siege ramps of their own good works - to try to accomplish enough to breach the walls of the Mighty Fortress of Heaven; to force their way into the Kingdom. Now, what those good works look like may change from generation to generation and religion to religion and country to country - including the viewing of relics, as Krauth told us about - but the core remains the same: storm the Fortress of Heaven by your own good efforts. Try hard enough and the Kingdom can be yours!

That is violence against the Kingdom of Heaven because while mankind is busy building their siegeworks on the western wall of the Kingdom, busy like bees, building and doing and striving and climbing, to build a tower like Babel, to overcome a wall that we cannot overcome - while we're busy doing all that, **on the other side, on the east, the gate is open!** And before that gate, is the God-man, our Saviour Jesus Christ, bidding us to come in. Calling to us, "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" (Matt 11:28)

Note well that word: **give**. You don't have to earn it, for you can't. You don't have to achieve it, for it is beyond your ability. You don't have to overcome it, because Jesus has done that for you. His death and resurrection are the gate, the open door, to the Kingdom of Heaven. The wall of our separation from God - the wall of sin, the wall of death - has been burst and opened by Jesus. And now He calls, through the messengers He sends - with His eternal Gospel. This good news for **every nation and tribe and language and people** of all times - including you and me! - telling us: the gate is open! Stop your violent ways, and turn away from your self-righteous efforts. Turn, or repent, and receive the Kingdom as a gift. The gift of God, prepared for you.

Stop. Turn. Repent. It sounds so easy, but *it's the one thing that - most of all - we don't want to do*. To admit we can't. To confess we're wrong. To acknowledge that we have failed. To recognize my helplessness before God, and my utter dependence upon Him. To confess that what God said through St. Paul in Romans is true not just of others, but of me: that **there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**. That's hard, because we *want* there to be a distinction! We *want* to be recognized for our efforts! And so instead of turning and repenting, we keep hammering away at that wall, don't we? Chipping away at it; trying to make some progress. For I *must* be better than my no good neighbor. There *has* to be a difference between me and the porno addict. I have to be higher on the ladder than all those serial killers, dictators, rapists, and all the other really bad sinners in our world. And not just in the world, we do this in the church as well, thinking: we must be better than the church down the street that is closing. There *has* to be a distinction between us who are here every Sunday and those who only come to church on Christmas and Easter. There *is* a distinction. There *must* be a distinction, if God is good and right and just and fair.

To say that anything and everything you have is all by grace, an undeserved gift . . . *well, its just not popular.* Which is why so many people keep trying to scale the walls themselves, instead of entering through the gate - the body and blood of Jesus (John 10). But through the body and blood of Jesus is the only way into the Kingdom of Heaven. Some think that's bad news. That it's too exclusive, too restrictive. But while it is exclusive, it is at the same time **all inclusive**. For while there is no distinction in that all have sinned, there is also no distinction in that ***all have also been justified by the grace of God as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*** He was the substitute and sacrifice not for the sins of *some*, but for the sins of all, upon the cross, that the call that goes out into all the world, to repent and be forgiven, be for all people. No matter how good or bad, how old or young, how high or low. Through the body and blood of Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is open to you. To come in and receive His gift of forgiveness. To come in and receive His gift of life. To come in and feast at His feast, which will have no end.

That is the ***eternal Gospel*** that Luther nailed to the wooden door of the church that day so many years ago. The Gospel, as Krauth so aptly noted, which was also nailed above the head of Jesus on the wooden cross - that there, bleeding and dying for your sake, is the King of the Jews, the King of the nations, the King of kings. That His death be the death of your death, and His life again be your life, in the forgiveness of your sins. That truth is what caused Luther to walk those 2,000 steps in some 15 minutes; probably a little over a mile - the distance from the door of his monastery to the door of the church - hammer and nails and scroll in hand, his heart undoubtedly pounding and his knees most assuredly knocking each step of the way. Did he have any idea of the tidal wave his action was about to cause? How could he? All he knew was how sinful he was, how impregnable the wall of sin and death, and therefore how wonderful this gift and how important this Gospel. And his pastoral heart, filled with the Spirit of God, drove his hands and feet and mouth to proclaim this Word, this Good News of salvation through Christ alone. Salvation by grace through faith.

Of that message - first spoken by God in the Garden to His sinful children Adam and Eve, and then proclaimed through the centuries by prophets and apostles, martyrs and pastors, and countless other messengers, known and unknown - of that message we are now the heirs. That the Mighty Fortress of which we sing is not the Fortress of Heaven that we must storm, but our Saviour Jesus Christ, who stormed the gates of sin, death, and hell *for us*, that through Him we have entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. And that in Him, we be safe from the assaults of the enemy, and set free from the fear of death.

And so in the Gradual today, I sung earlier: ***“Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! Walk about Zion, go around her, number her***

***towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God, forever and ever.*** (Psalm 48:12-14)

That psalm talks about God as a fortress with incredible defenses. Defenses not of stone and mortar, because the weapons of the enemy are not of sword and army; but for his weapons of thoughts, word, and deeds, we have defenses of water, words, and bread and wine. That when the devil tries to convince you that you are no child of God, you take refuge in Christ in your baptism and know that you are a child of God, not because you say so, but because there Christ said so! And that when the enemy tries to deceive you and mislead you into *false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice*, you take refuge in Christ in His Word, in His Absolution, and know that in Him you have forgiveness and hope, not because you deserve it, but because He promised! And when the old evil foe knocks you down and wears you out with his relentless attacks and temptations, you take refuge in Christ in His Supper, and know that here in His body and blood you have the forgiveness and strength that you need to make it through.

And of these things we tell and teach the next generation, that they too become the heirs of this message, this wonderful Gospel. That as we gather here each week and walk about Zion, we consider well the work of our Saviour and take refuge in Him, receiving the peace of His forgiveness and the promise of His rest. That come what may in this world and life - the destruction of hurricanes, the collapse of financial markets, the terror of troubles, the dread of disease, or anything else in all of creation - we have a Mighty Fortress. For as Jesus said: ***“Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”*** (John 2:19) Destroy it they did, on the cross; and raise it again just three days later, He did. And so He lives, never again to die. That in Him, we have a Mighty Fortress, both now and forevermore.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.