

Introductory

The lectionary gives us two options this week. The Matthew text is the traditional Reformation text, and it is the one appointed for use on this day in TLH. John (8: 31-36) is the appointed text for years A, B, and C in the LW three-year lectionary. LSB presents the option of either text, first Matthew then John, all three years for Reformation Sunday.

This text has a parallel in Luke (7:18-35). The accounts are very similar, often word for word, with Luke adding a little bit that Matthew leaves out and Matthew adding a little bit that Luke leaves out. If you don't have "Gospel Parallels," in a hard copy by not, you can look at <http://www.para-gospel.com/full>, but not at <http://www.gospelparallels.com/>.

Several years ago, I went to a Pastor's Conference. The speaker began with an appeal that we should preach more from the OT. What he said, the arguments he made for that thesis in his presentation pushed me to the extremist position that we should *never* preach from the OT on Sunday morning and that we should *always* preach from the Gospel.

For some time now, I have asserted that I "almost always" preach from the Gospel text on Sunday morning. My shift to the extremist position has actually been going on for some time. Although in the late 80's and into the 90's I often preached on the OT or the EP, I now can't remember the last time that I did not preach from the GO on Sunday morning.

The place for the OT and the EP is in mid-week services. For example, for the nine years that I ran Lutheran high schools, we had liturgical chapel presided over by LCMS clergy every day, we would often preach on the EP and sometimes the OT. When I was serving the church that had Wednesday services "out at the camp," I would preach on the EP.

Some city churches have a service during the week where the OT or EP might be preached on. The conclusion that one would have to draw from my extremist position is that if you want to preach from the OT or the EP, then you will have to have mid-week services, which I advocate. We don't do that, but just because I don't do something doesn't mean...

On Reformation Day we should talk about the Reformation. It's a good day to lead people to a greater understanding of historical perspective. Our congregations have become very egocentric because the people who make up those congregations have become very egocentric. It seems like the same can increasingly be said of pastors. Maybe it's just me.

While we were in the midst of the 500th Anniversary a couple of years ago, I found myself becoming uneasy about the whole thing. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, and then one fine summer day I found myself sitting in a church in Peoria, IL listening to Dr. Bushur from CTSFW, who was talking about early Christian martyrdom and the like.

He expressed slight consternation at our celebration, and then he hit the nail on the head. My discomfort was because it seems like some of the Lutherans think there was no truth, no orthodoxy, nothing true in the Church until Martin Luther. We all know that to not me true, but you would never know that by listening to much of what we were hearing.

I get it, it was a special time, and I get that on Reformation Sunday we will celebrated the 502nd Anniversary of the 95 Theses. Review the basic events, terminology, and chronology of the Reformation. More importantly we need to reiterate that the Lutheran Reformation was a movement about a lot of things, whose focus was doctrine; teaching.

We went to a wedding last Saturday at Our Lady of Guadalupe last Saturday; our nephew's son got married. I was sitting next to a guy, who asked me about a Lutheran Pastor like me sitting in a Catholic church like this. I told him that it's been over 500 years, and we're over it. Then he opined that the Reformation was "about money, right?"

I find that even the Lutherans have to be reminded at least once a year that it was about a lot of things, but primarily the Reformation was about correcting false teachings that had crept into the Christian Church over a period of several hundreds of years. The teaching was the most fundamental of all; how do I escape hell and gain heaven for eternity?

I wonder sometimes exactly how precarious the future of Lutheranism is worldwide, humanly speaking. We the LCMS are the largest confessing Lutheran church body in the world, and the other confessing church bodies in the world look to us for leadership, and we number about two and a half million in a nation of over three hundred million.

We continue to shrink numerically, and dual and now three-point parishes are becoming more common. How long it will be before Lutheranism, already an afterthought world-wide and in many places unheard of, will continue as a viable movement. What will the world of Lutheranism look like as the head continues to lose numerical steam?

In fifty or one hundred years will the Lutheran be like the Hutterites, who exist in 472 pockets world-wide, including 134 colonies with a total of 42,000 people in the United States (WIK)? In terms of numbers, the Lutheran outside of our country are in much the same condition as the Hutterites here; small pockets here and there.

When we went to Germany a year ago, I knew the number of actual Lutherans was small, and it's very small. Lutheranism in Germany can be summarized by a short conversation in Erfurt. We stayed at the Augustinian Monastery there, and we went to a late afternoon church service at the church there, attended by three Germans and two Americans.

After the service, the Germans sought out my wife and me to welcome us to church. We told them we were from America, and my wife told them we were Lutheran, and I was a Lutheran Pastor, and the man said, "yes, you say Lutheran. We say Protestant, we are Protestants. We compromise a lot, even with the Catholics."

In Wittenberg, we went to a Lutheran service at the Castle Church on Saturday evening. The English language service is run by American Lutherans, and about fifty were in attendance. The LCMS has a small rented space in Wittenberg, and they hold an actual LCMS Confessional Lutheran church service one or two Saturday evenings per month.

On Sunday morning, we attended St. Mary, the Mother Church of the Reformation, but we did not commune, and we were utterly unable to locate an actual SELK church at any time, and we were there for twelve days. I know they are there, just saying...so the state of Lutheranism in Germany, and the Scandinavian experience would be similar.

What's the point? That American Lutheranism of the future may look a lot like the European Lutheranism of today. American Lutherans need to know what's going on here and what's at stake. Whether or not, or how much they will care is a question that I cannot answer, but we are the watchmen and must warn them.

What to do about it? Keep proclaiming Christ crucified and educate your people the best that you can in difficult circumstances. Make Sunday morning the best that it can be and don't do things that will make us not want to go to church. Most importantly, remember that we are the Church Militant, not yet the Church Triumphant.

It is important to note here the context in which these words of Jesus are spoken. In the tenth chapter of Matthew we see Jesus choosing twelve men to be apostles, "sent out." That choosing is followed immediately for most of the rest of the chapter by talk about what the twelve should expect as they go out; the same things as happened to Jesus.

They should expect things like; persecution, hatred, suffering, and death. Finally, and mercifully, in the last three verses, He talks about the reward that they will receive. The eleventh chapter begins by telling us that "when Jesus had finished instructing His twelve disciples, He went on from there to teach and preach in their cities."

And then the account of John the Baptizer in prison and the disciples of John coming to

Jesus and asking Him if He is The One. There are two schools of thought as to whether John actually doubted the identity of Jesus or whether he was just sort of confirming what he already knew for the benefit of his disciples.

The first school is correct, as Luther duly notes. John, in prison, was having his doubts, and the words of Jesus must have comforted and assured him, and besides that Jesus pays him a great compliment. Then comes our text for Reformation, where we hear Jesus talking about the violence that will be done against Christians.

Later on, (Matthew 14), we have the account of the ultimate act of violence inflicted on John; beheading. The words of Jesus set before us must be seen in the context of that death, as a sort of wake-up call for the followers of Jesus as to what following Him would entail. The Reformers understood these things. The Americans of this Millennium; not so much.

Textual Notes

12. John is not the first prophet to suffer violence or death, and he won't be the last. In the OT, many prophets suffered much, but that was then, and this is now. This incident, as well as the words of Jesus, address the question of whether or not prophets in the Jesus era will suffer as well. The answer to that question, we now know, is in the affirmative.

That occasion of the arrest of John B seems to have sent a jolt through the heart of the Christian movement, including Jesus, who withdrew from public upon hearing the news. The whole conversation immediately preceding indicate the surprise of John B and perhaps his followers that he had been arrested and was at this time being held in prison.

Arrest itself can be seen as an act of violence, or at least potential violence; there's a reason why the law enforcement officer is carrying a gun, and if you have seen even one episode of COPS, then you know that arrest and violence often go hand on baton. The Jesus Group may have even already suspected the extreme violence on the horizon for the Baptizer.

Still speaking to the disciple of John, Jesus observes; “ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν ἡμερῶν Ἰωάννου τοῦ Βαπτιστοῦ ἕως ἄρτι ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν βιάζεται – from the days of John the Baptizer until now, the Kingdom of heavens has suffered violence.” The verb Βιάζεται is commonly used in the literature of the day, but only twice in the NT, here and in Luke (16:16).

The Luke passage is parallellish to this text, Jesus asserting that it is only through violence that the Kingdom can be entered. The paucity of that word in the NT should not surprise us. The word implies that force or violence will be used if necessary, and the we observe that Christians have been, are, and will be on the receiving of violence, not dishing it out.

The verb is in the present passive indicative form. The Church receives violence. Any forced conversions or other violence in our history are anomalies, not the norm. For many

religions, particularly Islam, forced conversions and other violence are the norm. You used to have to explain that, but since the days of ISIS – we have seen the visuals.

Such violence has, Jesus says, been going on since “the days of John.” John’s arrest is the first act of violence against Christians, with more to come. Next up; Jesus Himself, who will suffer violence in the form of Roman crucifixion, the last in a series of stabs in the back at the hand of His own people. He knew it was coming for Him, and for the Apostles.

All of them went as sent, and each in his own time suffered violence, and eleven of them obtained martyrdom. Much the same happened to the Seventy second tier Apostles, and it’s the story of most missionaries to this day. Since the Seventh Century, you can’t hardly talk about this text without talking the religion of violence, much of it against Christians.

Mark Steyn pointed out in *America Alone* just how pervasive Islam is becoming in Western “Christian” countries. North Africa was in many ways the heart of Christianity until Islam made its way east to west, conquering and imposing their religion, their progress stopped only by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours (722) halfway up the Iberian Peninsula.

From the other direction, it took longer moving east to west in the rugged terrain of Anatolia et al, but the invaders progressed until halted at Constantinople in 1452. They kept pushing, violating Hagia Sophia, and by 1683 they were still banging on the gates of Vienna. All along the way, Christians suffered great violence of the worst possible sort.

The west made great advances in science, and subsequently achieved military dominance, keeping Islam at bay. Steyn points out how on 9/11 Islam, unable to defeat the west on the battlefield, used our technology against us in a new way. Since then, the violence has become so common that Islamic terrorist attacks on foreign soil hardly make the news.

Steyn also notes the birth rates for Muslims and Christian Europeans and concludes that at the rate those rates are going, Muslims will outnumber the rest and in governmental systems where the majority rules, they will soon rule. Historically, when the Islamic population is in the minority, they play nice, as they do in America.

Historically, when they rule Christianity and all other religions are suppressed. A little over a hundred years ago, Turkey remained 20% Christian. Since then, the Armenian Genocide and a century of constant chipping away has reduced the Christians – today Turkey is over 99% Muslim, and the Christians have a tough row to hoe.

In Pakistan and India, the respective Muslim and Hindu majorities persecute the minority, and Christians in those countries find themselves persecuted by adherents of both of those religions. In the Middle East, Christians have been suffering various forms and degrees of violence for tens of hundreds of years, and it seems worse now than ever.

And, Jesus says, “βιασται ἀρπάζουσιν αὐτήν – by violence snatch it away.” When I do exegetical work, I do not study every word in depth. It can’t be done because of the constraints of time, and it’s not really necessary. But it is necessary to do a thorough study of key words in the pericope. One of the key words in this text is ἀρπάζουσιν.

That word is the present active indicative of ἀρπάζω, a verb that occurs two other times in Matthew in reference to Satan. Once (12: 29), the word is used to refer to the strong man entering in and “snatching away” one’s possessions. The other time (13:19), it is used of the “evil one” who snatches away a seed that has been sown.

As for John, he uses the word almost every time in the same way, including the sheep narrative in John 10, where he three times uses the word to refer to those who would “snatch away” the sheep from the Good Shepherd. Whether it’s Herod, or the Jewish leadership, or Islam, any violence done against Christians and the Church is from Satan.

It must further be recognized that Satan uses violence to a purpose; he wants to get Christians out of the Kingdom of Heaven and into his fold. The violence that Jesus talks about that will be wrought against the Kingdom of Heaven is for that purpose and for that purpose alone, and often it works, and other times it does not.

13. Jesus then asserts that “πάντες γὰρ οἱ προφῆται καὶ ὁ νόμος ἕως Ἰωάννου ἐπροφήτευσαν – all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.” We note that the primary meaning of “prophesy” in the Bible is one who proclaims God’s Word. A “false prophet” is one who claims to proclaim God’s Word, but in fact is proclaiming something different.

The construction of the sentence here indicates that there is a Segway from the Word proclaimed in the OT to the Word proclaimed in NT times by John et al. John is seen by Jesus as a continuation of the OT. I am among those who think that John was, in fact, a bridge prophet, the last OT and the first of the NT prophets.

We note that John is in prison and unable to proclaim the Word and that he’s going to die (Ch. 14), but already (Ch. 10) twelve more have been chosen to take his place in the prophetic office. John will be gone, but twelve are in position already to carry on his work. They will be the first generation after John and Jesus to carry on the work of proclamation.

They will write the Bible and pass the Faith on to the generations who follow, who will be guided by their writings, passing the Faith down to the next generation, then comes Martin Luther, who famously went back to the Bible and used it. Faithful pastors today stand in that same prophetic/apostolic office preaching repentance to those in their day.

It’s okay for Lutherans to talk about Blessed Martin like that on any Sunday, but especially on Reformation Sunday. It’s not okay for Lutherans to not mention him on Reformation

Sunday. It would be well for the Americans who think they suffer “persecution” for being a Christian to be reminded what real persecution was then and is now.

14. And speaking of OT prophets, Jesus declares “καὶ εἰ θέλετε δεῖξασθαι, αὐτός ἐστιν Ἠλίας ὁ μέλλων ἔρχεσθαι – if you want to receive it, he is Elijah about to come.” To get the full effect of that statement, we need to understand the common Jewish belief that before the coming of Messiah, the OT Prophet Elijah would return.

So was John Elijah, or not? No, he is not. When we speak of this or that athlete as “the second coming” of a previous athlete, we don’t mean that LaBron is actually Magic. In fact, sports talk guy can leave out “the second coming” and just go with something like “Mike Trout is Ted Williams,” and we get the comparison. So yes, John is Elijah.

15. People ask that question today, especially when seeking errors and contradictions in the Bible, which is like finding a needle in a haystack, except there’s no needle. Perhaps such was going on even as Jesus spoke, because He chases that statement with “ὁ ἔχων ὦτα ἀκουέτω – the one having ears, hear!” present imperative command to listen.

Later on in Matthew, He makes another reference to John as “Elijah (who) has already come” (17:12), which Matthew tells us the disciples understood to be John (v. 13). He is comparing John to Elijah and saying that the prophetic status of John is the same as that of Elijah, which was fundamentally probably why it would have been a hard saying.

Elijah was universally recognized in Judaism as one of the top three or four prophets of all time. John not so much, at least not in that day. He was popular and well-known, and they flocked out into the wilderness to him, but he was no Elijah. But now, two millennia later he has indeed been seen by modern Christians to have earned that comparison.

Of this saying, Ellicott says

The formula, which meets us here for the first time, is one which our Lord seems to have used habitually after any teaching, in parable or otherwise ([Matthew 13:9](#); [Mark 4:9](#)), which required more than ordinary powers of thought to comprehend. To take in the new aspect of the coming of Elijah required an insight like that which men needed to take in, without an interpreter, the meaning of the parable of the Sower.

16. Jesus goes on to talk about “this generation,” saying “Τίνι δὲ ὁμοιώσω τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην – to whom (what) will I compare this generation?” The primary meaning of that word is the one commonly used by us; a period of time of twenty or thirty years, the amount of time elapsed between the birth of children and their maturing to childbearing age.

There is a secondary meaning “metaphorically, a race of men very like each other in endowments, pursuits, character; and especially in a bad sense a perverse race: [Matthew](#)

[17:17](#); [Mark 9:19](#); [Luke 9:41](#); [Luke 16:8](#); ([Acts 2:40](#)), and that seems to be what is going on here, as we can see by what He says next in describing His hearers.

He says, ὁμοία ἐστὶν παιδίοις καθημένοις ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς ἃ προσφωνοῦντα τοῖς ἑτέροις – like little children, sitting in the market, calling out to one another.” I’m not sure – given the gap of 2,000 years and 10,000 miles – exactly how accurately we can know exactly what was going on in what appears to be a children’s game, but Ellicott does it like this,

The comparison is drawn from one of the common amusements of the children of an Eastern city. They form themselves into companies and get up a dramatic representation of wedding festivities and funeral pomp. They play their pipes and expect others to dance; they beat their breasts in lamentation and expect others to weep. They complain if others do not comply with their demands. To such a company our Lord likens the evil generation in which He and the Baptist lived. They were loud in their complaints of the Baptist because he would not share their self-indulgent mirth; they were bitter against Jesus because He would not live according to the rules of their hypocritical austerity. Thus interpreted, the whole passage is coherent.

17. We know that part of the game included the children “λέγουσιν Ἡὐλήσαμεν ὑμῖν καὶ οὐκ ὠρχήσασθε· ἐθρηνήσαμεν καὶ οὐκ ἐκόψασθε – saying ‘we piped for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not wail.’” The first reference is to the music and dancing of a wedding celebration, and the second to the mourning of a funeral.

The reference is to the religious leaders who did not like Jesus, but they didn’t like John either. It’s the old, “we don’t disagree with what you said, but how you said it,” or “the Pastor knows his Bible, what he says is true, but I just can’t get past the man’s personality.” It should be noted that nobody ever accused John or Jesus of proclaiming false doctrine.

18. John the Baptizer is portrayed thusly; “ἦλθεν γὰρ Ἰωάννης μήτε ἐσθίων μήτε πίνων, καὶ λέγουσιν Δαιμόνιον ἔχει – for John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘he has a demon.’” John lives the life of a hermit out in the desert and takes the Nazarite vows, which included abstaining from alcohol. It is never recorded that John went to a party.

The word used here for “drink” (πίνω) is a very general word used often and much like we use the word “drink.” It means any kind of consuming of liquid. The term “eating and drinking” is used one more time by Matthew (24:38), when He is speaking about how things will be on the earth, pretty much normal, when He comes again.

19. Jesus, on the other hand, is accused of enjoying life to the fullest, ἦλθεν ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐσθίων καὶ πίνων, καὶ λέγουσιν Ἰδοὺ ἄνθρωπος φάγος καὶ οἰνοπότης, τελωνῶν φίλος καὶ ἀμαρτωλῶν. – the Son of Man comes eating and drinking, and they say, ‘a man, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’”

Unlike John, Jesus did not take the extraordinary vows of added piety, and He ate and drank. When He was at the wedding at Cana changing the water to wine, are we to suppose that He did not imbibe? Do we think the same at any of the many dinner parties he attended, and if you are a teetotaler, then it's pretty hard to make the case that the man is a drunkard,

The word used there (οἰνοπότης) is derived from the word for “wine” (οἶνος) and drink (πίνω). We're talking about a wine drinker, the common alcoholic beverage of that time, and I suppose it's not beyond the realm of possibility, but I don't think people would accuse Jesus of being a “οἰνοπότης – drunkard” were He not consuming any alcoholic beverages.

Grape juice as we know it was not invented until the 19th Century by Mr. Welch, who did not think it appropriate to be consuming alcohol in church. Things like pasteurization and refrigeration made grape juice possible, but in first century Palestine, sans refrigeration or pasteurization, you could not keep grape juice for more than a few days at the most.

After that it would spoil, if not made into wine. Most grapes were made into wine for precisely that purpose, as well as to make the water potable when mixed with it. It is noteworthy that there is a word in the Greek language for “grape juice” (τρύχη) that could have been used to describe the changing of water into wine or the Sacrament, but it isn't.

Likewise, nobody is going to accuse the thin man of being a glutton, but both John and Jesus were accused – they didn't like either one of them, “καὶ ἐδικαιώθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς – but wisdom is justified by her works.” To return to the game, Celebrating Jesus would be the one living like a wedding, and Abstaining John like a funeral.

The people who are going to criticize and oppose Christians like John and Jesus are going to criticize Christians of all times and places, and we get that. Modern Christianity is under constant criticism, and that's the norm, and since the Reformation we criticize each other as well. Although Luther led an exemplary moral life, he is criticized.

No matter what you or your people do, you and they are going to be criticized. Once again, we can explain this in only one way; the same as the Pharisee who that one time not only had to tell God how good he himself was, but also had to criticize others also, the natural man makes himself good only by making others seem even worse.

Law/Gospel

Violence/Peace – Because of sin, this world is a place of violence for Christians. This has to be explained and illustrated to Americans, many of whom know nothing of it. The up side of this American experiment with religious freedom is that we can believe and worship

as we please. The downside is that we live our lives in the midst of Viral Denominationalism. That we do not suffer violence makes this text harder for the Americans to understand and for the preacher to apply.

Justification/Justification – I love that Pieper quote, the one about there being essentially only two religions in the world; the ones that teach salvation by works, and the one that teaches salvation by the works of Christ. The Lutherans to varying degrees have gotten their heads around the idea of being saved by the works of Christ. Some still believe that their good works somehow play into it. Preach the Law like there is no Gospel and then preach the Gospel like there is no Law. I would quote freely from the Book of Concord, keeping your quotes short and explaining what you just quoted.

No Word/The Word – Without the Word we know only what the natural man knows; that we have a problem with God because of sin, and that the solution to our problem must be to somehow appease the righteous anger of God. (I'm good with split infinitives. You didn't even notice it, did you?) God reveals Himself to us in the Christ, God with us in the flesh, working out or salvation by His life, death, and resurrection. The Word tells us about that Christ. The Word added to elements shows us the same Christ. Go ahead and talk about how the Church had strayed from the Word and the Reformers brought us back to it. It's not only acceptable, but expected that you would talk a little smack from the pulpit on Reformation Sunday. Luther especially liked to run smack against Leo.

Sermon Titles

The Kingdom of Heaven and Violence

The Church Militant and the Church Triumphant.

Then and Now and in the Future

Martin and the Reformers

The Cost of Truth

Pound that Hammer, Martin!

Hymns

Sing Reformation hymns on Reformation Sunday.

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