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The Reformation of the Church

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Faithless and Faithful

The annual celebration of the Reformation of the Church means to be more than a history lesson and more than an opportunity to remember Martin Luther. We observe this day because there are still forces in the world that attack the Word of God and those who proclaim and live it. Jesus warned his followers that they would suffer for the sake of the gospel but also promised that he would defend them and provide the words they needed to speak. We face the *faithless* opponents of the gospel by being *faithful* to Christ and his Word.

Sermon

Matthew 10:16-23

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

Introduction – Life doesn't stay the same, at least not for long. Times change and when times change some people like it and some people don't. You can just expect it. The House of Representatives has a new Speaker, and some people like it and some people don't. The Packers have a new quarterback, and some people like and some people don't. They're constructing new intersections on Mequon Road and some people like it and some people don't. You get used to it after a while. We know what to expect.

When Jesus came down to our world, a lot of things changed. Some people liked the changes and some people didn't. People whose sins plagued them and whose consciences tormented them loved the change because Jesus forgave their sins. People who were waiting for Messiah to come loved the change because they believed Jesus was the one God had had promised to send. But other people hated the changes. The religious leaders hated the change because Jesus challenged their authority. The politicians who wanted to get rid of the Romans hated the change because Jesus made it clear he had come to drive out Satan, not Caesar. They hated the change so much that they killed Jesus and planned to kill his followers. In today's Gospel Jesus warned his followers about what they could expect.

When the Reformation came to Europe, a lot of things changed. Some people liked the changes and some people didn't. Martin Luther and his colleagues challenged the authority of the Roman Church and the Roman Church didn't like it at all. The church denounced what he taught, put a price on his head, and forced him into hiding. In the hundred years after Luther's death half the population of Germany was dead due to the sword or starvation. In today's Gospel Jesus warned those Lutherans about what they could expect.

When you and I echo the words Jesus taught and the truths the Reformation reclaimed, some people like it and some people don't—and some people really don't like it. When we share the good news with our relatives and friends, some of them like it and some of them don't. When we speak to our neighbors about what God commands and what he forbids, some of them like it and some of them don't. When we send missionaries into American cities and into countries around the world, some people like it and some people don't. In today's Gospel Jesus warns us about what we can expect. And so what Jesus tells us in Matthew 10 is really about

Reformation's Expectations

Jesus was about at the end of his first year of ministry. He had gathered a group of twelve disciples who followed him pretty much everywhere. They heard his preaching and witnessed his miracles. It was time to send them out on their own. He gave them clear instructions: **As you go proclaim the message: the kingdom of heaven has come near.** Some people would like the message and some people wouldn't. He warned them: **I am sending you out as sheep among wolves.**

This wasn't the last time Jesus issued that warning. He repeated almost these exact words during the days before his crucifixion. He made the same point in different words at different times. He warned his followers that they would carry a cross whenever they stood up for him and the gospel. So these words aren't just addressed to the apostles then or to pastors now. Jesus is speaking to every believer. He was speaking to martyrs in the third century and confessors in the ninth century and reformers in the 16th century and Jesus is speaking to people like you and me in the 21st century.

As we anticipate all this, Jesus wants us to have our eyes wide open. **Be as shrewd as snakes,** he says. Don't be fooled by syrupy smiles and happy handshakes. People will pretend to agree even when they don't. But don't speak your peace with guns blazing, either. **Be as innocent as doves.** St. Paul said the same thing when he encouraged believers **to speak the truth in love.**

Jesus told his followers what to expect: **You will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.** The twelve didn't experience this on that first missionary trip but they did within weeks after Pentecost. Within a year Christians were fleeing Jerusalem to escape persecutions. History is full of stories about people persecuting Christians. Some of the persecutors were pagans and some were potentates and some were popes. Luther never felt the whip or the chains but other reformers did and Christians in Iran and Sudan still do. You and I have never felt the whip and we never will, not in this country. But we've heard the hissing and heckling of Bible-doubting denominations. We've seen our churches denied building permits and bogged down in governmental red tape. We've seen our schools threatened by the courts and denounced in the media. And it won't end, not when we stand up for the truth. We can expect it.

And sometimes the conflict hits closer to home. Jesus said it would. **Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me.** I haven't experienced anything this serious in my life and you probably haven't either. But my family was divided by synodical differences and maybe yours was, too. Family arguments about sinful lifestyles? Debates about the need to attend church? Resentment because of our witness? Heartache because of their rejection? For many of us it's a case of "Been there, done that." When we speak the truth, even when we speak it at home, even when we speak it in love, we can expect conflict. Jesus warns us.

Here's something else we can expect. We can expect that sometimes we'll be too scared to speak up. We'll be afraid to defend the truth. A pro-life sign on your lawn can get your house egged. Your defense of God's plan for sexuality can lower your grade or deny your promotion or produce laughter. Your serious words about faith can lead to family squabbles and unhappy holidays. Who needs that? And besides, we don't always know what to say, so we don't say anything. We don't mean to be disloyal to Jesus (although we are being disloyal) and we

don't mean to endanger the eternity of people we love (although we are endangering that). It's just that we've learned what God's truth often leads to; we've learned what to expect. The high school graduate heads off for college and when he comes home the first time, his mom asks him, "Did anybody give you grief because you're a Christian?" "Not really, Mom. Nobody ever found out!" You see what I mean?

Life can be pretty easy when we keep the truth about Jesus to ourselves. When we speak the truth that Jesus spoke, when we confess the truth to restrain evil and restore hearts and reform minds—that kind of reformation has expectations. We know what to expect from people. But we can also expect something from Jesus. **Jesus doesn't leave us hanging.** Jesus didn't die for us so that we could die for him. He didn't forgive our sins so that others could sin against us. He didn't adopt us into his family by yanking us out of our own families. Whenever Jesus warns, he also promises. Not sure of what to say? **Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.** The same God who puts faith in our hearts without us realizing it can put words on our lips without us planning them. Worried your words won't mean much or do much? Jesus told the Twelve, **Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.** Wherever they went and whatever they said, Jesus would be in action. We can't know what our words will accomplish, but God says: **My word will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.** Our witness always works in God's own way.

Do you wonder sometimes if you've failed to say what you needed to say or that you were silent when you needed to speak or that you let the Lord down and maybe let family and friends down, too? Do you worry sometimes that you've said too much or said it too strongly, that it may have harmed instead of helped? Listen. Jesus has enough love to go around. He wrapped his arms around us on the cross and he won't let us go. Our mistakes and our sins don't change that. He forgives us when we say too little and he forgives us when we say too much. He told his first followers, he tells all his followers and he tells these followers, **The one who stands firm to the end will be saved.** And that's something you can expect! Amen.