

Matthew 11:12-19 & Romans 3:19-28 – October 27, 2019 (Reformation Day)

We have a lot of guests with us this morning to hear our preschool children sing. And we're very happy to have you with us. But whenever we have the children sing and we have lots of visitors, I always imagine there are a couple different reactions to our service.

Some of you feel very comfortable in our worship service. Maybe you grew up Lutheran, or Roman Catholic, or Episcopalian, or one of any number of church bodies that still use a liturgy similar to ours. Maybe you still attend a church like that. And so our order of service feels very normal and familiar.

But some of you feel very uncomfortable. You're confused by our hymnal. You're scowling at our terminology. You're still trying to get accustomed to the sound of an organ leading worship. It all feels very strange to you.

Because worship practices span a wide range of styles and traditions. And while you may feel very uncomfortable with what we normally do, I'm sure there are many of our members who would be equally uncomfortable with what your own church does on a regular basis.

For some congregations, this diversity of opinion can become a "worship war." Where the congregation splits into factions backing different approaches. Organ verses praise band. Medieval hymns verses modern praise music. Casual liturgy verses formal liturgy.

You might think this is a recent battle, but it's actually been around for a long, long time. In fact, since its inception roughly 500 years ago, the Lutheran church has perpetually struggled to deal with worship practices.

It's written into one of our founding documents, in fact. Shortly after Luther's death, the Lutheran church began to fracture and fragment. And a document was drawn up to help unify the congregations and answer questions and help establish what we all did and did not agree upon. It was called the Formula of Concord.

And in the Formula of Concord, there's a great statement. It reads: "We believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because one has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other has, when otherwise there is unity with the other in teaching and all the articles of faith and in the proper use of the holy sacraments."

In other words, "Stop arguing about worship practices. We're all Lutherans." If only we would listen. That was written in 1577 and some of us are still arguing.

It's not terribly surprising, though. Because it's human nature to get caught up in the externals. In the ceremonies. In the music. In the chancel prancing and the smells and bells, as one of my seminary professors used to say.

That doesn't make it right, of course. In fact, that's exactly what Jesus is addressing in our Gospel lesson today. And he does so in a rather obscure, short parable. He says, "*To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'*"

OK, that's... odd. What is Jesus trying to say here? Well, first of all, when Jesus uses the expression "this generation," it's never in a positive light. By the end of Jesus' ministry "this generation" is a rather derogatory term.

It represents every hypocritical, unjust, uncaring, unbiblical thing that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are teaching. Jesus is there because "this generation" needs him. And, honestly, it's always true. "This generation" always needs him.

So this generation is like children playing music in the marketplace. But no one is responding to their songs. Why is that a bad thing? He's called them "this generation," which means he's gotta be condemning them for something. But what?

Well, he gives us a clue in the next verses: *“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’”*”

The sin that Jesus is condemning is the fact that the Pharisees and teachers of the law are all song and dance. They are all external ceremonies. They are all worship wars.

They sing a joyful song and they expect it will give people joy. They sing a sad song and they expect it will make people sad. But, in reality, there’s no substance there to be joyful about. There’s no substance there to be sad about. It’s an empty song and dance.

And they are so wrapped up in these superficial appearances that when men come preaching a real message with real substance, they can’t look past the surface. John preaches about repentance and the coming Messiah, and all they see is a demon-possessed man in the desert. Jesus comes preaching about the penalties of the law and the forgiveness of sins, and all they see is a guy who hangs out with thugs and prostitutes. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Stop looking for external ceremonies and listen to our message.

And we as Lutherans should know that better than anyone. Because we were founded by a man who discovered first hand how forcefully the kingdom of heaven advances. Martin Luther was many things, but he was not a timid man. And he couldn’t be. Because you cannot preach true Law and true Gospel without doing it forcefully. Violently, in fact.

Because there is nothing more violently offensive than telling someone: “You are a sinner and you deserve God’s wrath.” There is nothing more powerfully redemptive than saying, “By God’s grace, you are forgiven.”

And that incites forceful reactions from people. That incites violent reactions from people. And when Luther began preaching this openly, it almost got him burned at the stake. But it was the right thing to do. Because those two messages of Law and Gospel were exactly what the world needed to hear.

In a world like that of 16th century Europe, where the church had become a mockery of ceremony and money, much like it was in Jesus’ day, Luther needed to tell them forcefully, violently, “I will not play along with your song and dance. I have a real message to make you mourn your sinfulness. And I have a real message to make you dance with joy.”

And you know, we still have that message to preach. Because the church still does it’s song and dance. It still gets caught up in the externals. In politics and the promise of “health, wealth, and happiness.” In social justice and worship practices.

But doing that is just us getting caught up in our own works. In our own self-righteousness. When we argue about the externals and the outward ceremonies, we’re arguing about the best way to not be Christians. We are arguing about the Law. And, as Paul says, “by works of the Law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight.”

And yet, even in that sin, we find God’s grace waiting for us every day. And the eternal Gospel proclaimed to all who dwell on the earth is proclaimed most of all to you. Jesus condemns the empty children’s song of the Pharisees. But out of the lips of children can come the true Gospel as well.

Because God is so good. Even though *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* we are indeed *“justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* And he does care for me. For God put forward his Son *“as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”*

And he does love me so. So much that he would send his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life. Our preschoolers know something that we so often forget: God is so good. He’s so good to you and to me. Amen.