

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin Eden

Pentecost 23 – Reformation Day
Saturday, October 30, 2021 at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, October 31, 2021 at 9:00 a.m.

“We are Witnesses”

Matthew 11:12-19

Today we are celebrating Reformation Day, but that is not all. This is the first time we are having the full Confirmation class of 2020 together in a really long time. During COVID lockdown, when we were restricted from having more than 10 people together at a time, I had individual Confirmation services for the families (most of which took place during Christmas break in 2020).

The class of 2020 was going to be the largest Confirmation class I have ever had (and it still is) but a group picture had to wait until today. We traditionally have Confirmation on Palm Sunday, but I was happy that we got to do the Confirmation services around Christmas and have these youth bear witness of their faith centering around the Feast of St. Stephen, the First Christian Martyr. December 26 is the Feast of St. Stephen.

When we speak of martyrs, we generally speak of those who were killed on account of their faith. In our Gospel reading appointed for Reformation Day, Jesus makes reference to John the Baptist and how God’s kingdom suffers violence. John the Baptist, of course, died as a martyr. The Greek word “marturion” from which we get the word “martyr” simply means “witness.” The martyrs were

witnesses. St. Stephen boldly bore witness of his faith in Christ and the resurrection as the angry mob of Jews stoned him to death.

John the Baptist came as a witness concerning what Christ was going to do. When you confirm the faith of your Baptism, you do so as a witness of what Christ has done. Confirming the faith of your Baptism is a special day as it is the first time that you publicly answer the questions which your godparents answered for you at your Baptism.

It is every Christian's right and duty and privilege to share and to bear witness of what Christ our Lord has done. Be thankful that we do not live in a society where being a witness, being a "marturion" means standing up and proclaiming your faith in the face of an angry mob wanting to stone you to death. However, I will say again to the class of 2020, and to all you, the type of opposition to your confession of faith you will experience in this life will be challenging. As we heard Jesus tell Peter two weeks ago, the one thing you can be certain of in this life is persecution.

My message to the class of 2020 last Christmas was that they are entering into the most difficult years of their life – personally and spiritually. I tell this to every class; statistics show that 50% of 8th grade confirmands will stop coming to worship by the end of their 9th grade year. I tell the kids each year, "Don't be a statistic." But this message is also for the parents. 9th graders don't drive.

We are all called to be witnesses. Reformation Day is not about remembering Martin Luther nailing a piece of paper to the Wittenberg Church

door. This is a day to celebrate Luther and all who stood up and bore witness of the truth of God's Word, of the Gospel, of the Good News of salvation in Christ alone.

The thing about that word and why the ancient Christians joined together the idea of being a "witness" and being a "martyr" is that you never refer to a person as a "witness" unless they have something important or meaningful to share. No one would ever stand up and declare, "I bear witness to you today that I had buttered toast for breakfast."

We don't "bear witness" to unimportant things. Confessing your faith on the day of your Confirmation (no matter how long ago that has been) is obviously important. But we are doing today is important. Confessing your sins is important. Hearing the Absolution is important. Confessing the Nicene Creed and bearing witness of your faith in God today is important. In coming to the Lord's Table as the community of believers united in one faith, we do so bearing witness. St. Paul tells us, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. [1 Cor. 11:26]."

When Stephen bore witness of Christ and the resurrection, it was a matter of life and death, but not in the way we usually think of matters of "life and death." Jesus says, "He who bears witness of Me before men, I will bear witness of him before My Father in heaven. He who denies Me before men, I will deny him before My Father in heaven." This is why when Luther stood before the Emperor at the Diet of Worms and was ordered to recant, ordered to deny and

take back what He has written, he said, “I cannot and I will not recant. Here I stand.”

Making a public confession of faith in Christ is a matter of eternal life and death – not just today, but through your length of days.

For not just the class of 2020, but for all of you, as you confirmed the faith of your Baptism, as you stood as a witness before God and His church. You were asked: “Do you intend to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord’s Supper faithfully? Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death? Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?” And you answered each of those questions: “I do, by the grace of God.”

Everything that we have in this life – personally and spiritually is solely by the grace of God. Stephen and John the Baptist demonstrate through their words and actions that they were prepared to answer those questions. I pray that your faith is not tested to the degree that their faith was tested. However, what you all have stated before God and His Church is that you would rather suffer the fate of Stephen or John the Baptist than to fall away from faith and become a statistic.

God is gracious, and He has shown you what is important. And He has called you to be a witness. Amen.