

Committed to the Gospel!

What are you committed to? Your wife or husband? A political party? Your favorite team? Fitness and exercise? Your job? Your children?

The Reformation was all about a commitment to uncovering, cherishing and sharing the pure word of God. God used reformers like Martin Luther to share the Gospel and he faced persecution his whole life, but that was nothing new, today we see how Jesus' first 12 disciples were sent out on their missionary journey, call be to repentance and share the Good News of Jesus with them, and would they find welcome arms and homes? Well yes, sometimes, but they would also find resistance, and persecution. All Christians are sent out on a similar mission - share Jesus with the world. Today we pray that Jesus would keep us committed to his sharing his Word, as we face persecution from the outside and persecution from within.

Listen in on Jesus as he is sending his new disciples out in to the world:

Matthew 10:16-23

Did you hear that? Not the most positive pep talk ever. Do you think the disciples were looking across to one another as Jesus spoke, not so sure if they wanted to continue on this mission? *I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.* Whoa! Wait wait wait like a sheep sent out into the wolves? I don't stand a chance. That's death. And even though the disciples will be smart like snakes avoiding danger and pure like doves, when they are faithful to the word of God, when they preach that this Jesus is the only way to heaven, trouble will find them.

17 "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. 18 On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. A purpose of persecution is an opportunity to be committed to God's Word and to share it boldly. 493 years ago Martin Luther was given such an opportunity. Luther was called to stand up for Jesus and the Gospel before church officials, governors, princes, and the Holy Roman Emperor himself, Charles V. Luther thought perhaps he would have a chance to share the truth of the Gospel, to defend himself and his faith, but when he got there he was directed to a table holding 25 books that he had written, and he was asked only 2 questions - Are these your writings? Are you ready to retract them and admit that they are not true?

Luther looked over the books - "Yes I wrote these. But I need more time to answer your second question."

Throughout the night, Luther wrestled with his response. Luther now knew the forgiveness of sins. He knew a peace that he had search for his whole life. His salvation didn't depend on him, all is done for us in Christ. - Give that up?... Recant? How can one monk be right and the whole world be wrong....

Being vocally committed to the Word can be scary, even for us today. We belong to a little Lutheran church body that certainly faces some persecution for its uncompromising commitment to Scripture. People might say that we're old fashioned or intolerant.

It's easy to talk about Jesus in church, but how comfortable are we sharing our faith with the people we interact with at work or while shopping or at the park and rec game? The persecution that we face is nothing like the disciples face, yet we avoid talking to people about their savior. Have you been persecuted for your faith? I haven't, and maybe that says something about how bold I am in proclaiming my faith. I find myself thinking, "Oh that person would never listen to me. I'm wasting my time and theirs. It would just be embarrassing." Have you felt the same way? I think that kind of thinking reveals that practically speaking, we don't always believe God when he says that his WORD is powerful and effective. We start to think that it all depends on our delivery, that I have to say it exactly right or it's not going to work. But God's word is powerful on its own apart from how I package it.

And that's not all, Jesus also promises the Holy Spirit. - *19 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, 20 for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*

What did that look like? It wasn't like the disciples went into a trance and the Holy Spirit just took over and started speaking through them like a puppet master. Yet in a miraculous way, God gave them words to say. Kind of like the Old Testament prophets or the authors of the books of the Bible. The Holy Spirit kept this promise. We see it in Stephen as he witnesses before the stones started to rain down on him or in Peter as he preached after Pentecost. "They were filled with the Spirit" and spoke boldly."

And Luther spoke calmly and boldly too. After spending the night in prayer and preparation, he approached the princes, governors, church leaders, and rulers of world, and he made his statement. The Word of God was at stake. The forgiveness of sins was on the line. The gospel was under attack. - *"Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen"*

What about us? Well, if things would ever get so bad that we would be arrested and put on trial for our faith, Jesus would still give us the confidence that his Holy Spirit is with us and will give us words to say. We wouldn't have to destroy ourselves with worry. But does it give us an excuse to have a lukewarm relationship with God? To never open a Bible outside of church? To never think about how we might talk to someone about their Savior? No, of course not. We have been given the very powerful word of God. There's an encouragement for all of us to read it, and to make it part of our lives, to realize how the Gospel is everything, it is our life! Cherish the Word. Commit passages to memory. Think about stories that you could share. And then make it a point to go out of your way to talk with people that you know are not Christians. The Holy Spirit gives us confidence as we witness to others. God will make faith grow when and where he wants to, but he asks us to plant the seed.

The Word is powerful! The Holy Spirit is with us! We're committed! Then Jesus brings it closer to home...

²¹ *"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me,*

Persecution can cut as close as family and yet extend as out as far as everyone hating you because of the one who rules within you. *Everyone will hate you because of me.* Jesus uses really strong language here. And it's a scary picture, family members turning each other in to be killed, killing each other. Praise God that it doesn't often come to this in the United States. But there are countries where if you become a Christian, you have cut yourself off from your family.

But let's look even closer. Why don't we always boldly proclaim the message of Jesus forgiveness? It's because of temptations and trials and persecutions and battles that going on, not in another country or another time, but right here right now inside of each of us. If we are worried or fearful about sharing the Gospel, it reveals a deeper problem. Our reluctance to proclaim goes deeper than laziness, or fear of offending. It comes from a lack of trust in Jesus. Maybe he didn't know what he was talking about when he commanded us to go into all the world and share the gospel with all nations? Did we believe him when he said that he would always be with us?

We don't always trust that God's plan is the best plan, so we focus on our things that we can handle, things that are safe. We see that Jesus says - *but he who stands firm to the end will be saved*, and we look inside of us and think that the pressure is on. Do you ever wonder if you could stand firm to the end? What if persecution came close to home, could I hold on to God's Word and witness clearly? If I shrink away during the small opportunities to proclaim - even from introducing myself to a visitor at church - How will I be able to stand if real suffering comes?

We need to take the focus off of ourselves and point it in the right place. Of course a sheep lowered into a pack a wolves doesn't stand chance. If the face of real persecution I couldn't stand firm, I would crumble, the whole church would... but our focus is in the wrong place. Take a moment and look back to the first words of our lesson today, the words that come before all the fear, the betrayal, the hatred. See those 4 small seemingly insignificant words - *I am sending you*. There is no need for fear; there is no reason for doubt, because we are being sent out by the Good Shepherd. The great I AM, God himself, is the very one who calls us to go out preach and teach in his name. The God who can close the mouths of lions can protect us from persecution. In everything we do, we never leave the care of our shepherd. Jesus is the one who sends us and causes us to stand firm to the end. He strengthens our hearts and re-commits them with the Gospel - *but he who stands firm to the end will be saved*. He promises salvation to those who stand firm, and we know that he will make good on that promise because he experienced and conquered everything that he prepares us for.

Jesus was handed over the council and witnessed to Pontius Pilot that he was King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but he chose not to use his power to free himself. Instead he allowed himself to be betrayed by brothers, hated by the world, and the children that he loved, had him put to death on the cross. He is the One who faced the pressure of the world and the burden of our sin and promises that we - His Church - will stand firm to the end.

So be bold - The Gospel is powerful. The Holy Spirit is with you. Jesus has sent you.

Amen.