

Sermon
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Sin Boldly or *Sing* Boldly?
Pastor Dan Peterson

In the November edition of *The Quill*, a copy of which you can pick up in the narthex or view online, Cantor Kyle invites us to “*sing* boldly...and believe more boldly still.” He does so in the spirit of the Reformation, which was our focus in forums and worship leading up to Reformation Sunday last week.

It’s clear our cantor knows his audience. Most of us will recognize “**sing** boldly” as an allusion to a quotation from Martin Luther, who told his friend and colleague Philip Melanchthon to “**sin** boldly.”

But what did Luther mean?

Here’s the context:

In 1521, Prince Frederick the Wise of Saxony had Luther “kidnapped” after the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, condemned Luther for his refusal to recant his teachings. Luther lived in Frederick’s territory, and as one biographer puts it, the prince did not want his most “prized professor” at the University of Wittenberg (Luther’s hometown) to meet an untimely death.

And so, Frederick’s men kidnapped Luther after his appearance before the emperor and tucked him away in a secluded castle until things would be safe for his return. This meant Melanchthon, a professor of ancient languages whose gifts were much more suited for the classroom, was left in charge until Luther could return.

Chaos quickly ensued.

Local advocates for church reform, including one of Luther’s colleagues at the university, stirred up the townspeople. The celebration of the Catholic mass was not only misguided, they said. It was *sinful*. Everything related to the mass must, therefore, be destroyed.

The townspeople followed suit, ransacking everything from statues and stained-glass windows to icons and altars. Melanchthon accordingly “wrote a letter, now lost,” desperately “asking Luther to comment on the [apparent] sinfulness of Catholic practices: things such as celibacy, fasting, [and the practice of receiving only the bread in the sacrament of holy communion]” (Reeves, “Did Luther Really Tell Us to Love God and Sin Boldly,” *TGC*, accessed 11/2/22). Can we maintain the mass, he wondered, by reinterpreting it in light of the rediscovered gospel, the message that God claims us and loves us unconditionally in Jesus Christ? Or must it be abandoned entirely?

“Sin boldly,” Luther replied, as if to say, “Philip, you must make difficult decisions concerning what to take out and what to leave. You will undoubtedly make mistakes in the process. Nevertheless, let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.”

Perhaps Luther's advice extended as well to the townspeople. "Philip, do what you can to curb the violence," I imagine Luther saying. "Be firm but compassionate. Whatever you decide, proceed with conviction, accepting that you may go wrong but trusting in the forgiveness and grace God grants you in Jesus Christ."

Singing Boldly

Cantor Kyle's invitation in this month's *Quill* to "*sing* boldly...and believe more boldly still" hopefully inspired a few of you to chuckle. It's a clever play-on-words. Now, in addition to *sinning* boldly, we should *sing* boldly – we should proclaim the gospel of Christ's victory over sin and death not just in speech but through song!

Consider our hymns for today.

As we mourn the loss of the people we loved who have died, sons or daughters, husbands or wives, mothers or fathers, friends or other family members, we nevertheless began our service by singing "alleluia" repeatedly.

That's so strange! Why would we do that?

The answer appears in the third stanza of the hymn when we sing of the "saints triumphant," that is, those who continue to be sustained even after death by the invincible power of God's love. This is the good news, right? Death does not have the last word.

Sing boldly!

Something *unprecedented* has occurred in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through it, if only for a moment in the grand sweep of world history, a glimmer of God's "new creation" has appeared (2 Cor. 5:17).

And here's the secret: the new creation not only refers to what the Jews have long called the "messianic age," a time in the future where we will be reunited with our loved ones and suffering will no longer exist. It also refers to a possibility available to us in the *present*. Even now, even on this side of the grave, we can experience the renewing power of the resurrection in our own lives.

Do you know this power?

It's what enabled Paul in spite of debilitating chronic pain to say of God in Christ, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

Do you know this power?

It's what enabled Martin Luther King to stand up to racial and systemic injustice even though he knew he would very likely be killed.

Do you know this power?

It's what enables young people today to face the threat of climate change, even as the world burns and even if a "sixth extinction" is inevitable.

And it's the power that enables each of us to face illness, grief, and chronic pain, trusting that the source of our desire for healing and wholeness rests in the power God gives us to *keep going instead of giving up*.

Yes, we can sing *alleluia* even in the face of death and even as we mourn, for Christ has risen.

Sing boldly...and believe more boldly still!

In Christ, the firstborn of the dead, death has been defeated.

Death Transformed

Our Hymn of the Day likewise proclaims *alleluia* in the face of death, albeit without using the word. Here we gather with the "saints at the river that flows by the throne of God." The river, of course, represents time. We walk along its banks for just a few short years, only to join those who have died before us in its ever-flowing stream. The Book of James captures the sentiment perfectly. "What is your life?" its author asks. "For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:14).

Here, however, the river is more than just a symbol of time. It also brings comfort.

Think of how its flowing sounds can soothe the soul, or how its waters (as in baptism) can renew us and reorient us. It's not simply a place where people go to be reminded of their mortality and die. It's a place where people go to be with God, the alpha and the omega, the beginning of the stream and its end. Soon we'll reach the shining river," we sing accordingly in stanza four, "soon our pilgrimage will cease; soon our happy hearts will quiver with the melody of peace."

Do you notice here what Robert Lowry, the author of this hymn, has done? In the stroke of a single sentence, he transforms the image of death as something horrifying into that which brings peace, especially when *all other options for healing in this world have been exhausted*.

For many years, I have appreciated Paul's description of death as the enemy of God (see 1 Cor. 15:26). When someone says to a bereaved parent that God "took" their now deceased son or daughter home, we should always go back to Paul. God, he maintains, does not want death any more than we do.

But there are exceptions.

When death brings an end to incurable suffering, for example, then it comes as a gift.

Soon our pilgrimage will be over, we sing in Our Hymn of the Day, soon our hearts will quiver with the healing melody of peace.

The Saints Triumphant

Our sending hymn reminds us once more that death will not have the last word.

Unlike the Hymn of the Day, however, it offers a sharper contrast between the turmoil

of the present age and the life in the world or age to come. Indeed, stanza four reminds us that the “triumph song” of God’s victory over death is distant such that we can barely hear it amidst the noise of our daily lives.

“But then,” we sing in line six, “there breaks a yet more glorious day, the saints triumphant rise in bright array; [and] the King of glory passes on his way.” What a powerful affirmation, especially in the face of death. What amazing news!

Martin Luther, how should we respond?

Sing boldly and believe more boldly still!

Proclaiming the Good News

Sing boldly. It’s the play-on-words Kyle used in reference to the famous advice Luther gave to Melanchthon. “Sin boldly,” Luther wrote, as if to say, you must make difficult decisions when it comes to reforming the church. That said, “let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.”

Sin boldly – yes, venture forth in faith, to which we add on this Day of All Saints, sing boldly, for love has won! Our separation from God has been overcome. We have been absolved, and death will not have the last word.

May we all sing boldly and, because of what we sing, believe more boldly still.

Amen