

Reformation at 500 and Counting

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
October 29, 2017—500th Anniversary
of the Launch of the Protestant Reformation

- Psalm 145 ⁸ The LORD is loving and merciful, slow to become angry and full of constant love. ⁹ He is good to everyone and has compassion on all he made. (Good News Translation)
- Romans 3:21-26 ²¹ But now God's way of putting people right with himself has been revealed. It has nothing to do with law, even though the Law of Moses and the prophets gave their witness to it. ²² God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ, because there is no difference at all: ²³ everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence. ²⁴ But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. ²⁵⁻²⁶ God offered him, so that by his blood^[a] he should become the means by which people's sins are forgiven through their faith in him. God did this in order to demonstrate that he is righteous. In the past he was patient and overlooked people's sins; but in the present time he deals with their sins, in order to demonstrate his righteousness. In this way God shows that he himself is righteous and that he puts right everyone who believes in Jesus. (Good News Translation)
- Theme: It's God's initiative, not human goodness or accomplishment, enabling us to hope and believe, to receive the gift of faith drawing us to follow Jesus.

*Holy and Mysterious God, open our eyes to see you in our midst, open our ears to hear your word afresh, open our hearts to know your grace. Give us understanding minds and willing spirits, that we might be continually made new by your love. In the name of the living Word we pray. Amen.*¹

You just did four things that were almost unimaginable 500 years ago:

1. You actually held a Bible in your hands.
2. You were able to follow along as it was read to you.
3. You could understand what the words meant because it was in a language you speak every day.
4. And you could begin to discern for yourself the spiritual significance being conveyed by the scriptural text.

Not all of that is due to the intellect and spirituality of a monk named Martin Luther, but he had a hand in it. We happen to be living at the time when we are able to mark that five-hundred years have passed since the Christian faith began to undergo a major overhaul, remodel, a renovation, a reformation thanks in large part to Martin Luther.

Luther was born in Germany in the year 1483. He started training as a lawyer but ended up joining an Augustinian monastery where his gift for the study of theology was evident. Luther earned a doctorate from the new university in Wittenberg (in Germany, not Ohio), and subsequently was made the chair of their theology department. At the same time he served as pastor of a local parish of the Roman Church (what we now call the Roman Catholic Church; I remind you that the Christian Church based in Rome was our predecessor church before the split resulting from the Protestant Reformation). And while

¹ Submitted by Rev. Teri Peterson, Ridgefield-Crystal Lake Presbyterian Church, Crystal Lake IL, at <https://www.liturgylink.net/category/feast-days/reformation-sunday/>, accessed 10/26/2017

teaching and pastoring, Luther also continued his responsibilities as second-in-command at the monastery. He was a busy guy.

What most of us remember Martin Luther for is that he tacked a paper onto the door of a church: it was an invitation for public debate on ninety-five statements about common church practices. I've told you about my 6th grade Sunday school teacher Ms. Greenawald. On the last Sunday in October when it was time for class to start she purposefully walked up to the closed door in the front of the classroom, and with tacks and a hammer aggressively nailed a large piece of paper to the back of the door. That, she told us, was what Martin Luther did on October 31, 1517.

But since then I've learned that it wasn't as dramatic as we may have imagined.

You've seen notices stapled onto telephone poles and tacked onto grocery store bulletin boards announcing garage sales or lost pets or job opportunities, right? Back in Luther's day, the big wooden doors of the local church served a similar function; they were a community bulletin board, the logical place for Luther to post his announcement about a public discussion. Public postings like this were a common occurrence; Luther didn't draw attention to himself by using a tack-hammer on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg. In fact,

...at the time, no one, including Luther, had any idea that these [Ninety-Five] Theses would become so popular and spread across Europe. There was no reason for the event to be thought of as memorable, as it was an event that happened regularly in the university community. Only a few weeks before, Luther had circulated another set of theses for a different academic debate.²

So what, exactly, was that document, the famous "Ninety-Five Theses"? Remember, in addition to being a monk and pastor, Luther was an academic, a professor of theology. Like many scholars of his day he was fluent in Latin, Greek and Hebrew as well as his native German. Recent advances in scholarship at that time had resulted in more accurate translations of the Bible into Latin from its original Hebrew and Greek. (Before long the Holy Scripture would also be translated into the languages people could speak and understand: German, French, English, Czech, Russian, Swedish and more.) From his study of more accurate translations of scripture Luther realized that he understood "a central theme of the Bible in a new light, which was that men and women could be saved from God's judgment and eternal death by the free and unmerited grace of God in Jesus Christ."³ Luther and other clerics had begun to realize that some teachings and practices of the Roman Church weren't actually from the Bible. One practice in particular rubbed Luther the wrong way: the Church's common practice of selling what were called "indulgences." Let me explain where they came from.

In our worship we're familiar with what's called public confession of sin. We recognize that we do not possess God's perfection; we tend to make mistakes, do things that are hurtful to others, act selfishly. A word for that kind of behavior is "sin." There are many different ways to sin. Not all of us do all of them; most of us don't do most of them most of the time. Still, sin is part of our human nature.

So when we come before God in worship we collectively confess our sinful nature—that's why we join together in a unison Prayer of Confession each week. But in the old Roman Church priests heard confession individually. (The Catholic Church still does sometimes.) As God's ambassador, the priest would hear a person's confession, pronounce forgiveness and then assign "penance"—a task or duty you carried out as a way of encouraging you to "Go and sin no more."⁴

But the Roman Church had instituted a means by which you could pay a price and get out of having to carry out your task of penance. For a fee to the Church you could buy what was called an "indulgence"—a permission—that released you from having to carry out the assigned act of penance, whether it was to say a certain prayer a certain number of times, or carry out specified acts of charity. You

² <http://www.lutherstheses.com/did-martin-luther-really-nail-the-Ninety-Five-theses-why-on-halloween/> accessed 10/24/17

³ Herman Selderhuis, "Commemorating the Reformation in 'Post-Christian' Europe?" in *Theology Matters*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Summer 2017, p.6

⁴ John 8:11b

can see the problem: the wealthy could live wild, unsavory lives, confess their sordid behavior but then simply pay money to the church and be issued what amounted to a “get-out-of-jail-free” card.

But that wasn’t all. The Church taught that before departed souls went to heaven they spent some time in a place called Purgatory for a pre-heaven purification; Purgatory was where your soul was *purged* of its impurity. But you could also purchase indulgences to reduce the amount of time you spent in Purgatory after your death; for that matter you could purchase indulgences to speed up the passage through Purgatory of deceased relatives and friends.

About the time of Martin Luther, Pope Leo X promoted a campaign of selling indulgences to raise funds for the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica – the same magnificent St. Peter’s you see in Vatican City today. It was a massive and elaborate project requiring a lot of money, and the sale of indulgences was a lucrative revenue stream. To make matters worse, local priests could line their own pockets with a percentage of the revenue brought in by selling indulgences. Apparently many priests actively promoted the sale of indulgences including a priest serving not far from Luther named Johann Tetzel. In his preaching Tetzel regularly encouraged the purchase of indulgences. I wonder if it was Fr. Tetzel who was responsible for the jingle well known at the time which translates into English as, “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs!”

To Luther, the selling of indulgences wasn’t the problem but the symptom of a larger problem: in some ways the Church was claiming authority that rightly belonged to God.

With all this stirring in Luther’s mind, apparently it was Fr. Tetzel’s bold marketing of indulgences that caused Martin Luther to put pen to paper and write up a dozen, two dozen... *ninety-five* things about the Roman Church that troubled him! Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses were soon translated from Latin – the language of the church and scholarship – into German to be more widely read and discussed. Plus, the recent development of Gutenberg’s moveable type printing press enabled Luther’s discussion points to be spread throughout Europe. This further encouraged public debate about whether the Roman Church – Luther’s own church, remember! – was acting contrary to scripture and tradition in profiting (literally!) on peoples’ remorse for their sinful failings.

Luther argued that sins could not be forgiven nor could salvation be gained by making forgiveness and salvation a commercial transaction. We cannot buy forgiveness, nor can we buy our way into heaven.

From these conclusions came three major ideas which have influenced the way we understand our relationship to God to this day. These ideas are – retaining the Latin – *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fidei*. Only Scripture, only by grace, only by faith.”⁵

It’s likely that Luther’s study of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans brought about this insight, this clarity. Luther couldn’t ignore the Apostle Paul’s assertion we heard this morning in Romans 3:23 that “everyone has sinned and is far away from God’s saving presence.”⁶ Luther was convinced that “everyone” included poor and rich, meek and mighty, laity and clergy, and for that matter, bishops and cardinals and even the pope. God who made us knows our imperfection that causes us to be imperfect, wrong-doing human beings prone to sinful behavior. We ourselves cannot fix our imperfect nature. Since all are sinful, Luther wondered, what hope for being redeemed does anyone have?

I like the way a Yale Divinity School professor explained what Luther determined from his study of Paul’s letter to the Romans. “Because we fall short of God’s glory, only the God of glory can make us right. God does this as a gift. The word for God’s gift to us is ‘grace.’ Grace means gift, abundant gift, undeserved gift, gift that makes everything wrong wondrously right.”⁷

Luther concluded that faith wasn’t the result of a person’s success at striving to understand and follow God’s will. Faith is not something a person achieves; no, faith is a gift a person receives. It’s God’s initiative, not human goodness or accomplishment, which produces a desire within us to hope and believe. It’s God that gives to all who will receive it a desire to follow Jesus. God makes us right. God

⁵ “The Sign on the Door: 500 years of Martin Luther,” *Homiletics – September-October 2017*, 70.

⁶ Romans 3:23 Today’s English Version

⁷ David Bartlett, *Romans – the Westminster Bible Companion*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, 38

makes us whole after our sin has broken us. God saves us not because we deserve or have earned the blessing of being saved. God makes us right by God's grace as a gift.

On Thursday I posted on Facebook a photo of my desk covered with a mess of books and papers, part of the usual scene as I'm preparing a sermon. Describing the photo that morning I wrote, "My sermon for Reformation Sunday is still a work in progress... as is the Reformation itself." True – even after 500 years of Reformed Protestant worship emphasizing God's sovereignty and grace, we still struggle to receive God's gift of grace which "forgives, passes over, forgets our former sins."⁸ We still hesitate to accept that God freely re-establishes with us a right relationship despite how we've turned our backs on God, and how we've devoted ourselves to things other than God, and how we've tried to put ourselves in the place of God.

Martin Luther must have wondered how the Church could have missed what was stated so clearly in scripture, as in Ephesians 2:8 which proclaims, "For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it." God's grace is amazing because we know we don't deserve it. The beloved hymn says "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me...."⁹ We probably recoil at the idea that we would be called "wretches," but that word expresses the greatness of God's gift to we who are undeserving. Luther was bold to proclaim that the gift of faith is not something controlled by the institution of the Church; faith is a gift to anyone who will receive it – yes, to you and to me – faith to follow Jesus, faith offered by God's grace – God's abundant, undeserved gift.

Before the day is out each of us is certain to notice some small deed we do, some brief comment we utter, some passing thought we have that reveals our unflattering, less-than-divine human nature. It's who we are. But our sinful nature doesn't condemn us to never being good enough for God to love us. By God's grace we are forgiven, accepted, "saved" from the consequence of our sin-prone nature. God shows God's forgiving, saving love in Jesus Christ – love that is ours when we accept the gift of faith to embrace Jesus as Master of our lives.

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⁸ David Bartlett, *Romans – the Westminster Bible Companion*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, 39

⁹ "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound," lyrics by John Newton (1779) and *A Collection of Sacred Ballads* (1790), music from *Virginia Harmony* (1831). *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalm, and Spiritual Songs*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990, No. 280