

MARTIN LUTHER: A SERMON IN THREE PARTS, delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2016

LUTHER AND HIS CALLING

This morning we celebrate Reformation Sunday. Historically, it's always been a glad occasion for churches like our own. Because it marks the event that gave our churches birth.

Of course, our Christian churches date back to the time of the Jesus—or at least the immediate aftermath of his death and resurrection. That's almost two thousand years ago. However, 499 years ago, the Christian churches in the western world underwent a major course correction that redefined how many of us understand our faith. That course correction came to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

The words “protest” and “protestant” have their roots in the Latin word, *protestas*, meaning “to witness.” A Protestant, then, is a witness—in this case a witness to a new way of living out our Christian faith. Meanwhile, the term “Reformation” is even plainer to understand. To re-form is to reshape.

Basically, the Protestant Reformation was a movement of Christians who wanted to witness to Jesus Christ in a new way and to reshape the church as the body of Christ accordingly. They believed that the church as it stood was corrupted by materialism.

Protest within the Christian churches had been percolating for some time. A century earlier a couple of outspoken priests had called for change. The memory of these courageous priests, John Wycliffe in England and Jan Hus in the Czech Republic, are still honored. But their protest never gained the wider traction it deserved. It was squashed by the Roman Catholic Church headed by a pope in Rome. Reformer Jan Hus was actually burned at the stake as a heretic.

However, in the early 1500s a communications revolution was underway as dramatic as anything we see today with social media. Moveable type printing had just been invented, making it possible to rapidly and cheaply produce books and pamphlets as never before. On the scene, a priest named Martin Luther suddenly appeared, once again protesting church corruption and materialism and calling for church reform. This time the established church authorities couldn't suppress the protest. Moveable type printing made it possible for Luther to spread his ideas faster and further than the Catholic church

could contain them. The result was a religious revolution, which came to be described as our Protestant Reformation.

All in all, Luther's leadership of the Reformation is a little surprising. The Catholic Church could not have had a more devout and faithful priest. Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany, the child of prosperous parents. His dad had wanted him to become a lawyer and sent his son to college for all necessary training. Yet Luther had a searing emotional experience in a thunderstorm while walking through a dense woods. Frightened by the flash and boom of lightning all around, he appealed to Saint Anne, the mother of Mary, to save him from death and vowed to become a priest and monk if she did. The storm abated and Luther, against his father's wishes, took the vows for priesthood.

Already in those days, there were many different orders of priests serving the church. Luther chose to join the Augustinians, who ran some of the toughest, most rigorous monasteries to be found. Although different in an obvious way, joining the United States Marines would be the best equivalent. The Augustinians not only honored vows of celibacy and poverty strictly. They also laid heavy spiritual demands upon their priests: moral and spiritual perfection were expected.

No priest strove to perfect himself before God more than Martin Luther. Amid Luther's sincere and intense efforts lay the seeds for revolutionary insights about what is really possible for human beings and how we should understand our relationship with God.

LUTHER AND HIS HAMMER

Although as a priest, Martin Luther lived somewhat apart from the rest of the world in a monastery, he was not completely isolated. People visited the monastery regularly. The Augustinian Order also made its priests available to hear the confessions of men and women at the monastery and in some the local churches. In his subsequent years of priesthood, Luther probably heard tens of thousands of confessions of men and women reporting on those ways that they had sinned.

As a priest hearing these confessions, Luther was supposed to assign penance and offer forgiveness and absolution, which is the final wiping away of sin. This first-hand experience in the confessional booth provided Luther with a window on human nature and the struggles that we face in resisting and overcoming sin. Luther came to appreciate more deeply than ever the sheer stubbornness of human sin. Meanwhile, he also began to doubt the adequacy and effectiveness of church-mandated penances as a prescription for sin. Are fifteen "Hail Mary" prayers before the church altar, as ordered by a priest as

spiritual punishment and penance, really going to change the behavior of a man who loses his temper at home and beats his wife and children?

Luther began to take further umbrage with the church practice of selling “indulgences” for sin. Through the indulgence system, church members could literally purchase certificates of forgiveness for wrongdoing they or another family member had committed. What particularly galled Luther was that the system of indulgences had become a big money maker for the church. As Luther saw it, the church was exploiting both the fear and laziness of men and women who didn’t want to land in hell but weren’t willing to make the necessary moral and spiritual changes in their lives to assure themselves a place in heaven.

For a long time, Luther kept silence in the face of a practice he liked less and less. In fact, he was increasingly preoccupied with his own career. Recognizing his talent and ability, his Augustinian Order promoted Luther over time into one of their top administrative positions. Luther was placed second in command over seven monasteries. He was also appointed as a professor of scripture at the university in Wittenberg, Germany. This gave Luther plenty to do. However, two events or circumstances prompted Luther to focus his attention on the problem of penance and what he had come to regard as the scandal of indulgences. First, Luther made a pilgrimage to Rome where he saw with his own eyes the wealth of the Roman Church on conspicuous and hypocritical display. As someone who took his own vows of poverty seriously, all of Rome’s lavishness was a big turn-off for him. Second, back home, Luther soon confronted a fellow priest who was conducting an aggressive scheme to raise the money from Germans to help finish the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The priest, named John Tetzel, was selling indulgences for sin.

Apparently, Tetzel, who belonged to the different order of the Dominicans, believed in the sale of indulgences heart and soul. He earned both a master’s and doctorate degrees theologically defending the whole idea of them. He was subsequently appointed as the Grand Commissioner of Indulgences for Germany. Tetzel was also quite the salesman. History records an advertising limerick that he widely used to promote the sale of indulgences. The limerick declares: *“As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.”* In Roman Catholic theology, purgatory was that place between heaven and hell where the dead, who had led less than good lives, had to await a purging of their sins before they could ascend to heaven. Tetzel claimed that their ascent from purgatory to heaven could be accelerated if surviving relatives purchased spiritual indulgences on their behalf.

Standing up against Tetzal, Luther thoroughly rejected the idea that the dead could be helped into heaven this way or that indulgences would benefit the living in the absence of a sincere regret and remorse. Moreover, at this point, Luther believed that active works of charity were always to be preferred over the passive purchase of an indulgence as an act of penance. This conviction became the heart of 95 Theses or Statements that Luther wrote up and then—with the aid of a hammer—nailed to the door of the great church at Wittenberg, Germany.

Luther chose All Saints' Day, October 31, 1517, to publicize his protest. It was a holy day in the life of the church which meant that a lot of people would be coming and going, giving great exposure to Luther's objections and complaints to Tetzal's practices. There were a lot of Germans who were upset by all the fundraising for St. Peter's Basilica in distant Rome. They proved highly sympathetic to Luther. Also, there were many local German princes who felt that the Catholic Church wielded too much power and authority in their domains. These same princes stepped forward to protect Luther against efforts by the church to quickly brand him as a heretic and put him to death. In fact, one of these princes, Frederick of Saxony, subsequently "kidnapped" Luther and kept him hidden away in protective custody. This gave Luther and those who agreed with him more time to develop their arguments against the spiritual corruption of the church.

Meanwhile, the moveable type presses of Germany began to rapidly churn out thousands of copies of treatises prepared by Luther, stating his controversial positions and challenging the authority of the church on indulgences and other matters. Although today we seem to prefer pulp fiction over theological treatises, Luther's writings were a big hit back then, issued in one best-selling edition after another. While not everyone could read, the literacy rate in Germany was high enough to ensure the spread of Luther's ideas north, south, east, and west.

LUTHER AND HIS LEGACY

Martin Luther's starting complaint with the Roman Catholic Church was its stance on indulgences for sin, as defended by Johann Tetzal. However, as he stepped away from his duties as monastic administrator and university professor to focus on his theological objection to indulgences, he began to realize that he had some deeper complaints about the church and its theology. Over an extended three year period as he continued to battle the church hierarchy who wanted to shut him down, Luther began to formulate other doctrines that he believed were more faithful to the way of Jesus Christ.

Reading his Bible, Luther took note of the Old Testament declaration that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (*Joel 2:32; Romans 10:13*) Yet even

more inspiring for Luther was the Apostle Paul's own assurance in his Letter to the Romans that "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (*Romans 10: 9, 13*) For Luther, who had always struggled for spiritual perfection without reaching his goal, these were liberating words. Guided by this biblical wisdom, Luther became fully persuaded that our salvation as men and women is by faith alone. We can't manipulate God into saving us. Nothing we could ever do merits our salvation. It is only through a heart-felt faith in a loving, forgiving God revealed through Jesus Christ (*John 3:16-21*) that we can break the shackles of sin and enjoy the kind of meaningful life that God wants for us. On this basis, Luther not only rejected the spiritual value of indulgences in any form but also the idea that we can work our way to salvation and keep ourselves out of hell. Luther still felt that Christians should perform good works. Yet they should be an outflowing of our thankfulness to God for the salvation he has made possible for us through his son, Jesus.

But Luther didn't stop there. Facing down a pope in Rome who excommunicated him from the Catholic Church and then declared him an outlaw, Luther rejected the doctrine of papal infallibility—the notion that the pope has access to perfect truth and knows better than anyone else what is right or wrong. Instead, Luther insisted that the Bible, rather than the Pope, should be the ultimate authority for the church and its members.

Luther also discarded the idea that the ordained ministers of the church, whether the pope or any other priest, were spiritually superior to non-ordained members of the church. In a truly radical step, Luther affirmed the "priesthood of all believers." Anyone doing honest, creative labor, using God-given talents, was honoring God and should be considered part of the church's priesthood.

Finally, Luther considered the sacraments of the Christian Church—those holy moments in our worship life in which we draw closer to God and God draws closer to us. Skeptical of the actual spiritual value of many of them, he whittled the sacraments down from seven to two, keeping only baptism and holy communion in place. Moreover, Luther took another look at communion and criticized the idea that the prayers of communion miraculously transformed the bread and wine of the sacred meal into actual body and blood of Christ. Christ, he declared, was really present at the time of the communion meal without any material transformation of the elements that the people of God shared. Put another way, there did not need to be any miraculous material change for Jesus Christ to be spiritually available to worshippers.

The popularity of all these ideas proved greater than even Luther initially anticipated. Thereafter, Luther began to believe that they would sweep the entire church. His goal

was to reform the existing Roman Catholic Church, not found a separate church movement. Yet despite early successes, the spread of Luther's proposed reforms began to stall in Germany itself. Embraced by some German regions, Luther's reforms were shunned by others who preferred to remain staunchly Catholic. Germany became permanently divided between Catholics and Protestants.

Moreover, those areas of Germany that were receptive to Luther's reforms began to experience further debate and dissent about what it means to be a Christian. This led to the emergence of several other Protestant Christian groups who felt that Luther had not gone far enough in separating Christianity from Roman Catholicism. These new church groups questioned the practice of infant baptism and took issue with Luther's teachings on the "real presence" of Christ at communion and salvation by faith alone. In the end, a couple of dozen different Protestant groups emerged, each with their own ideas as to how practice our Christian faith.

Luther didn't agree with the directions that these fellow Protestants were taking. Yet he had the satisfaction of knowing that his views on the authority of the Bible, the priesthood of all believers, and the simplification of the sacraments were widely accepted, even by those who couldn't agree with him 100 per cent on other things. Ironically, when the dust had settled somewhat on their conflict with Luther and other Protestants, the Roman Catholic Church also clarified its own stance on the spiritual indulgences that had roiled the waters in the first place. Contrary to what Tetzel had touted, the Catholic Church now rejected the idea that we could buy indulgences in order to help our deceased family members reach heaven faster. In fact, the whole idea of indulgences went largely out of fashion for Catholics, tainted as they were by the controversy with Luther.

Luther, who put his life on the line for his faith, enjoyed a relatively long life by the standards of the day, surviving to age 62. He married a former nun, Katarina von Bora, and had five children. By his own account, marriage and family life were a great joy for him. But they were a source of sadness for him too. One of the most poignant moments in Luther's entire life was the death of his young, beloved daughter, Magdalena. However, his faith in a loving, forgiving, gracious God remained undimmed. Luther's faith is expressed in the magnificent hymn he wrote, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, where he expresses confidence in God's ultimate triumph over evil and all that hurts, maims, or destroys.

Our own church has roots in the lands of Germany where Luther's reforms first saw light. Indeed, the original German Evangelical heritage of our congregation, represents a

convergence of both Lutheranism and the German Reformed movement which sought to expand upon the church reforms launched by Luther. Although we now go by the name of St. Paul United Church of Christ, due to mergers with other Christian groups, we remain Protestant through and through. To those who ask, I sometimes describe ourselves as “Reformed Lutheran.”

Almost 500 years after the start of the Protestant Reformation, we continue to be indebted to Martin Luther for so much. His keen spiritual insights inform our understanding of the Bible, the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and church leadership, as well as our belief in a loving, forgiving God who offers us the gift of an unearned salvation—yes, in spite of ourselves.

Today, on the anniversary of the hammer stroke of Martin Luther, let us honor him and celebrate the legacy which he and other Protestant Reformers have imparted to us. May we uphold that legacy by our own heart-felt faith in God and the humility with which we walk in the footsteps of those who have illumined the way for us. **Amen.**