

“THE BIG BANG,” A Reformation Sunday Sermon, October 28, 2018, delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor

This Sunday as we gather we celebrate a big bang. No. I’m not referring to that cataclysmic moment when God created the heavens and earth—even though that’s worthy of celebration in its own right. Instead, I’m talking about the big bang that came with the hammer stroke of Martin Luther. On October 31, 1517, Luther hammered a statement of protest against his own church onto the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. Since that time Christianity has never been the same. Five centuries later we still hear echoes of Luther’s hammer banging, banging, banging.

I think most of us know the reasons for Luther’s original protest—although a refresher may be helpful. In sixteenth-century Germany, Roman Catholic clerics were selling “indulgences” as a fund-raising scheme to help pay for the construction costs of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. These indulgences were for the forgiveness of sins. People who could afford to buy them supposedly improved their chances of obtaining salvation and a heavenly eternal life. As the church then claimed, it was also possible to buy “indulgences” for family members who had already died and might be indefinitely stuck in Purgatory, a place where in the Catholic scheme of things sins were purged and purified enabling a final ascent into heaven.

In Germany the foremost salesman for these indulgences was a priest named John Tetzel. To boost sales, Tetzel even had an advertising slogan that, translated, went something like this: *“When every coin in the coffer ring, another soul from Purgatory springs!”* Luther, who had already emerged as a leading teacher and scholar for the church, was scandalized by Tetzel, who was pretty aggressive in pushing sales. But Luther wasn’t the only one upset. Deep research into the historic archives of the Catholic Church in Germany and elsewhere reveal that other church leaders and priests felt that the sale of indulgences had gotten completely out of hand. A more select number believed with Luther that the whole notion of indulgences was theologically misguided or wrong. Yet it was Luther alone who spoke up against such corruption of the church and its purposes as the body of Christ on earth.

Basically, Luther was the kind of outspoken guy who just couldn’t keep his trap shut when he saw something morally or spiritual amiss. Later, as controversy swirled around him, he stated his considered opinions forcefully and boldly, saying: “Here I stand, I can

do no other!” In this case, writing out his objections or complaints about the sale of indulgences in 95 “theses” or paragraphs, Luther took the radical step of grabbing a hammer and nailing them all to the big front door of the Wittenberg Cathedral where they could be seen and read by everybody on the eve of All Saints’ Day. Thus, a protest or “protestant” movement got underway.

From our present vantage point we may look back and see the emergence of the Protestant churches as something inevitable. In Luther’s day, however, such a total split from the Roman Catholic Church headquartered in Rome was not such a sure thing. We know that it was not in Luther’s mind. Rather than pushing for secession from the Roman Catholic Church, Luther was calling for a re-form or reshaping of his church to put its moral and spiritual integrity back on track.

Nevertheless, after Luther spoke up and continued to do so, the waters could not be calmed. His protest escalated into a major intra-church conflict. The brash way that Luther had challenged the top leaders of the Roman Catholic, going all the way up to the pope, put them on edge. Naturally, they felt threatened. Consequently, they reacted by trying to silence Luther. In a power play, they banned him from publicly speaking at all. Yet backed by German princes, who had their own issues with the church and its constant intrusion into local politics, Luther staunchly stood his ground—and then some. Although he had to go into hiding, hidden away in a castle that belonged to one of his princely supporters, he remained as outspoken as ever, writing and publishing extensively on what needed to be reformed and changed in the church.

Taking all this in, the Roman Catholic Church proceeded to declare Luther a “heretic.” It was the hierarchy’s way of putting all of Luther followers on notice that they would also face excommunication and be denied the sacraments of the church if they stuck with him. But Luther was not intimidated. He issued his own salvo, calling Pope Leo X the “anti-Christ.” And his own supporters joined the chorus. With such ugly charges and challenges exchanged, there was no going back. By the time the smoke cleared, it was very obvious that the bonds of Christian unity had been sundered, ripped to shreds.

Just as the Roman Catholic Church had previously divided from the Orthodox churches of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, it now stood opposite and apart from another grouping of Christian churches which came to be variously known as “Churches of the Reformation” or “Protestant” or “Lutheran.” While the Roman Catholic Church did

everything it could to shore up its base, stamping down any further internal dissent, these other “new” churches had to figure out who they were, what they really believed, and how they were going to organize themselves for the long term. The road was not easy for either Roman Catholics or the new Protestants. On top of their struggles with Christian identity, their supporters in the field got caught up in a brutal and bloody Thirty Years’ War over who should control what lands.

Of course, making everything even more complicated, the Protestant Reformation didn’t end with a separation from the Catholic Church. It became quickly apparent that the great Luther also had his share of Protestant critics across Germany, France, and elsewhere. Although these Protestant critics applauded Luther for taking his stand against the Pope and the corruption of the church, they began to loudly argue that the former Augustinian monk had not gone far enough in distinguishing his new church from the old one. Indeed, a slightly younger generation of reformers, most notably John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, pushed for a more thoroughly reformed church—a church stripped of all trappings and vestiges of Roman Catholicism, literally and figuratively. They vehemently argued for simpler, more informal worship services; less frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper to prevent it from becoming a rote act; and the abolition of the bishop’s office in favor of ecclesiastical councils. They also proposed their own doctrines of salvation. They did not necessarily agree with Luther that salvation for Christians was by faith alone.

In unity with Luther, however, both Calvin and Zwingli agreed with him that God’s word should be the main authority for the Christian church. They also affirmed the “priesthood of all believers,” which we speak about today as the “ministry of the laity.” In short, all of the Protestants were united in claiming that each Christian had equal access to God through prayer and did not need any priestly intermediary or the intervention of hallowed and venerated saints in seeking God’s love, grace, and help.

In the 21st century, the truth proclaimed in Christ’s name by the 16th century Protestant reformers continues to hold sway. This is not only reflected in what we as Protestants teach and preach but also in the style of worship. To say the least, church worship has become more simple and informal than ever before. But what is really remarkable is the way that the big bang of Luther not only resounds in Protestant churches like our own but also reverberates throughout the Roman Catholic Church which was once Protestantism’s greatest antagonist.

The look of many Roman Catholic churches today is almost more Protestant than what we see among Protestant churches. They are often plain and bare. Also, ever since the Vatican II Council of the early 1960s, the Roman Catholic churches have shifted their emphasis from a *merit* system of salvation to Luther's idea of an unearned salvation attained through faith in God's love and grace. Although we can't rewrite history, we have to acknowledge that Luther probably would not have left the Catholic Church or, rather, claimed that the Catholic Church had left him if it had been making the same kind of proclamation about salvation through faith that it is making today.

Significantly, the Roman Catholic Church does not see the old divide with Protestantism in the same way, either. Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis have made it a point to visit the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Rome to join in prayers for restored Christian unity. In doing so, they have also paid their respects to Luther, whom their church communion trained and educated and spiritually developed.

Luther would appreciate those papal gestures. And without any arrogance on his part. Although he could be a very disputational kind of guy and, in fact, never ran away from an argument, he also believed in reconciliation—in letting bygones be bygones, especially when we are doing God's work in the loving, forgiving spirit of Jesus Christ. Despite his utter contempt for those spiritual indulgences that John Tetzel was selling on behalf of the church, Luther later went out of his way to write to Tetzel when he became ill and ailing. Luther sought to provide Tetzel with spiritual encouragement, as well as cheer him up, even though he stood on the other side of the Protestant-Catholic divide.

Reading various biographies of Luther that have been written over time, I've come to the conclusion that he regretted the fact that the great Protestant-Catholic divide had to happen at all. After all, there was so much that Luther still loved and cherished about the Catholic Church and his upbringing and education within its academies and sanctuaries. To use a phrase that Luther actually used, you don't throw the baby out with the bath water. Instead, in the words of scripture we should hold fast to that which is good. (*Romans 12:9*) As he looked back on his own role in the disruption of Christian unity and the break-up of the Christian church, Luther was consoled by his own sincere conviction that what happened truly served God's purposes. He felt the same way about the proliferation of different Protestant groups, which became even more pronounced after his death in 1546.

I think that we need to keep Luther's approach to church life in heart and mind. We should park our own human egos and not make more of our differences than is absolutely necessary—and certainly not in any self-serving way. At the same, we do have to stand up for what is right, just, truthful, and faithful—as God empowers us to understand what these things mean. Our desire for peace and unity as Christian men and women, however compelling, always needs to be counterbalanced by a commitment to do what is right and true and loving and faithful.

Ironically, today, when Christianity seems to be out of fashion and people just prefer to talk about being “spiritual,” a lot of churches don't want to talk about what they really believe out of fear of turning people off. They hide behind the label “non-denominational.” If you ask their members why they attend church at all, they'll say it's for the music or fellowship. There's very little understanding about the values their church community espouses, apart from the importance of being saved through Jesus Christ. There's no grappling with what Jesus might have to say about the real issues that haunt the human beings of planet today and what we should do about them. Indeed, almost obsessive talk about the authenticity of everyone's salvation drowns out any deeper conversation and consideration of what it means to live lives that are “saved” and our responsibility to open ourselves up sanctification—in other words, lives transformed by the grace of God and reflected in new habits of living that bring us closer in everyday life to the truly loving example of Jesus.

If he was to be transported to our age, I don't think the forthright and outspoken Martin Luther would be too happy with us. He would probably see us as Christians without much salt. And you know, as Luther did, what Jesus thought of that. (*Matthew 5:13*)

As Christians we need to take our faith more seriously than most people in and out of church do. We need to make sure that our lives are aligned with God and how he wants us to live. Yes, it very much matters what we believe. Ultimately, it's important for us to *know* what we believe, plus evaluate and verify that what we believe is really true by testing it as we best can against any available facts and even the intelligent opinion of others. And then it's important for us to *stand up* for our beliefs and convictions, particularly in a day and age when so many people seem preoccupied with nothing more than amusing and entertaining themselves everywhere they go. In clarifying what we

believe and the truth of it, we might just find as Martin Luther that some reformation of our faith and ideals and understanding of our life purpose is needed.

Congregation, what have you done last or most recently to be more informed, intelligent, and faithful about what you believe as a Christian? May the vigor and determination of Luther's hammer stroke, as we remember and imagine it, resound for us as a call to be Christians worth our salt, committed to lives that are truly aligned with the way of Christ and the example of those, like Luther, who have faithfully witnessed in his name. **Amen.**