

The Sign on the Door

The Reformation: Five Hundred One Years and Counting
A Half Millennium With Martin Luther

Scripture Reading - Today's lectionary lesson IS.....that very, famous Pauline pericope....Martin Luther made famous. It is powerful. It is simple. It is eloquent. ~ BUT...it is also difficult to translate.

I choose for our reading here the J. B. Phillips translation of Romans 3:28 (selected verses, read in context)....and may God commend to our hearing hearts....this morning lesson.

19-20 We know what the message of the Law is, to those who live under it. No one... can justify the self before God by a perfect performance of the Law's demands—indeed it is the straight-edge of the Law that shows us ...how crooked we are!

21-26 But now - we are seeing the righteousness of God declared quite apart from the Law — it is a righteousness imparted to all who have faith in Jesus Christ. (For there is no distinction to be made anywhere: everyone has sinned, everyone falls short of the beauty of God's plan.)

27-28 So, what does this mean...for our human pride...in our achievements? There is no room for it. Why; because failure to keep the Law - - has killed it? Not at all; the law is still alive. But - we have value because the whole matter is now on a different plane—believing ...instead of achieving. Get it? We see now that one is justified before God by the fact of faith in God's Saviour.. and not by what we have managed to achieve under the Law.

Prayer - My two prayers today, both before...and after the sermon...were written... by Martin Luther.

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs be filled.

My Lord, fill it.

I am weak in the faith; strengthen me.

I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor.

I fail at firm faith. Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith. In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have. Therefore, pour your Word into me. Always. Amen.

- adapted from Martin Luther (1483-1546).

Sermon -

We love to mark ..anniversaries.

And sometimes the celebration is more an observance ..than a joyous occasion. For example, last year was our centennial of America's entrance into the "Great War," World War I. Such celebrations are somber, remembering the fallen from that conflict.

But birthdays are celebrations also; they're anniversaries! In fact, the French expression for "happy birthday" is *joyeux anniversaire*. Joyeux anniversaire to **Samantha Bingham** this week.

And we celebrate wedding anniversaries, too. (**This week Tony and Hector**.)

New lovers celebrate the day they met, the day they first kissed. The day they first made love. The day the toothbrush was added to the toothbrush holder -- everything.

Kids ! ...celebrate everything.

And - we celebrate notable events ..or discoveries in history. We celebrate birthdays of people who made a difference in the world: presidents Washington and Lincoln. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

And, speaking of him... whose birthday we celebrate every January, - - *this year* - today.... we celebrate the 501st anniversary of a "**movement**" ignited by the man for whom MLK Jr. was named, **Martin Luther** (born 1483- died 1546).

This wasn't.. justa civil rights movement, although you could make that argument.

It was the... **reformation**.

What Martin Luther did October 31, 1517 (Notice! All Hallowed's Eve.... That was intentional on his part....playing against the saints...and the Pope...) What he did 501 years ago Wednesday, sparked a protest and reform that came to be known as the Protest-ant Reformation.

What did Luther do?

He posted a sign on a church door. It was that simple! A simple act... But it ignited a firestorm...and our faith has not been the same...since!

Luther had written a little tract which had 95 ...'debating points'. Ninety-five Theses.... which he hoped would be the basis of a discussion for what he considered some dubious practices in the catholic church. (Remember, we were all Catholic then. Catholic means....universal.)

He called his tract The Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences. [Let me unpack that; it is easy to follow!]

These 95 Theses (as they are called in church history)...were written in Latin and printed by a local printer. The printing press was a relatively new media invention at the time. As a matter of fact, some argue that without the invention of the printing press, neither the Protestant Reformation nor the American Revolution could have happened.

Luther had his 95 propositions printed on a folio sheet and then he tacked them to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany.

In those Dark Ages....Church doors were often used as a place to post announcements. It was a kind of published and posted...Town Crier...for those few who could read; the town leaders always got their news there.

But *these* theses....tacked on that chapel door.... They caused a stir immediately.

This action... This posting of the 95 Theses -- was quickly recognized as the beginning of a religious, theological, and cultural...*hurricane*. Just 10 years later, on the 10th anniversary of this posting, Luther himself and some friends had a pint in a local pub to celebrate the quote, "trampling out of indulgences." [Now indulgences...were the sale...of salvation to Heaven...by the Roman church....so the Pope could pay....for building St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.] Kinda controversial....wouldn't you think? We'll come back to this...

Philip Melanchthon, another Reformation figure, regards this date as the beginning of the Reformation in his 1548 *Historia de vita et actis Lutheri* (A History of the Life and Acts of Luther).

In 1617, 100 years after the posting of the theses, October 31 was celebrated by a procession to the Wittenberg Church. According to one source, "An engraving was made showing Luther writing the Theses on the door of the church with a gigantic quill. The quill penetrates the head of a lion symbolizing Pope Leo X."

What Luther posted was not an essay or sermon. It was a series of propositions or statements about which he hoped there would be debate. The major issue, as the title of the document indicates, was indulgences. And the thesis... gets right to the point:

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said *Poenitentiam agite* [repent, do penance], willed that the whole life of believers should be one of getting yourself right with God.

The following 94 theses argue similar points.

Luther was deeply concerned about selling these "get-out-of-jail-FREE" cards - called indulgences. Indulgences released people from needing to repent of what

they did wrong. And the more serious the crime, the higher the cost of the indulgence. An indulgence could also be purchased to shorten the time a loved one needed to spend in Purgatory. A popular jingle at the time that sellers of indulgences would sing was "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs."

Luther felt that the church was teaching people they could literally buy their way into Heaven... Or buy God's favor ...when in fact, the sale of indulgences was simply fattening the wallets of local priests, and especially....the treasury of the larger church, in Rome.

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

From his conclusions, based on scripture, came 3 three major ideas which have so influenced the way we understand our relationship to God....that they have a name: The Three Solas. These ideas are -- sola Scriptura, sola gratia, and sola fidei. Only by Scripture, only by grace, only by faith.

1. Sola Scriptura. Central - to Luther's view of the primacy of Scripture... is his theology of the cross.

Romans 1:19 says 'people can know there's a God from their experience of the created world, but...*that* knowledge does not lead them to know who God is'. (How many of you have friends who say they worship God...through nature? This....is what lacks...in that approach!) Paul's indictment of unbelievers...is not because they are atheists... but because they've become idolaters. So - Luther says - a person who tries to understand God from what can be observed about the world "does not deserve to be called a theologian." !Instead, a true theologian is someone who quote: "comprehends what God says... as seen through suffering and the cross."

The one we trustis the one who hung on the cross. ..Who was raised on the third day. Luther says, "True theology...is in recognizing God.... in the crucified Christ."

Listen up, beloved!

~We will close today's worship with a Lutheran hymn, written by the man himself. The paradox in this statement about < the power > ...of a > crucified Christ....is something we sing! (In Luther's own words.) And knowing this....comes from scripture alone. Sola...scriptura.

2. Sola gratia. Only by grace... are we reconciled to God. Nothing we do can earn God's favor.

The prevailing view then was that if you wanted to get into heaven... To be saved from eternal damnation, you needed to work for it. / Question: Is there a subtle sense in which we still, somewhere in a crack of our heart, believe that today? We have such a strong sense of the virtue of fairness that we want to

believe God will give people who try hard, give it their best effort, those who live a good, clean life...God will give them a ticket to the heavenly show.

But Luther said no one is embraced by God ..because of good works. God's world is not a meritocracy. (rewarding those who try hardest) The earth doesn't work that way; neither does Heaven.

It is only because of God's grace and unmerited favor...that we are invited to be a member of the family of God.

In November 1999, the Lutheran World Federation Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity... ☺ (yes, they exist)... issued a "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification". (SLOW – deliberate!) It said, "By grace alone, through faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping us and calling us to good works." (Did you follow that? Our good works.... are a result of what we believe. Not the other way 'round.)

And the Methodists, in 2006... voted unanimously to adopt Luther's declaration which expresses, quote: "a far-reaching consensus in regard to the theological controversy which was a major cause of the split in Western churches in the 16th century" (the Protestant Reformation, which split us)... In other words, one by one by one....all Christian sects (including the Roman Church) are coming together. We are saved by grace, not our own works. All Christians.....believe this!

3. Sola fide. Only by faith... This view advanced by Luther is known as "justification by faith alone." It presumes a great divide between humanity and God. ^ We - stood in need of reconciliation. And this rapprochement occurred - on the cross. We can't do anything to achieve reconciliation on our own finite, human merits.

We only receive this faith - through the saving work of Christ on the cross. Then, and only then, are we reconciled with God.

Commenting on Question 59 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Gary Neal Hansen tells of a little experiment he does in theology classes. He asks students to raise their hand if they are righteous. Typically, not a single hand goes up. Yet that very question of the Catechism says: "In Christ I am righteous before God and heir to life everlasting."

Why - are seminarians so reluctant to affirm this simple claim found in one of their own church's confessions? "Our problem," Hansen explains, "is the heavy load of baggage we bring to the issue. If someone claims to be righteous, we fill in all kinds of definitions. We assume that being righteous comes from personal

achievement, or virtue attained by personal effort. We hear these words as a claim that someone has kept the Ten Commandments and everything else required to be perfectly good. And we assume nobody can do that."

Fortunately, because of God's grace, our failure to follow God's law is not an issue.

Hansen continues: "On my own I'm guilty. But I'm not on my own any more. Now I'm Christ's. And through Christ...I am good enough."

☺ It's strange that after 500 years this fundamental Reformation truth of justification by grace through faith : ...is still so hard for us to accept.

We cannot justify ourselves. But...here's how Luther puts it, "Through faith in Christ, His goodness ...inspires our goodness. And all that he has ...becomes ours; he himself becomes ours.

Well - -

The impact of Luther's work is so far-reaching, even beyond the religious sphere to political and cultural realms as well, that it is well nigh impossible to sum up 500 years of his influence....in twenty minutes.

Our Question, written in Scripture.. and posed by the Holy Ghost to us, is: Have we been reformed in Christ?

And we look to the Word, living in Christ, preached by the Communion of All Saints, God still – speaking today....to remake and remold us, reform us....in Christ's image.

Amen.

Sermon Closing Prayer - Let's pray....

Waken our hearts, O Lord, our God; make them ever watchful to serve you and your purposes. Trouble us with the smallness of our vision and work. Rekindle in us a renewed desire for the coming of your glorious kingdom when all wrongs will be made right, when everything that is broken will be made whole, and when we will trade a cross for a crown.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

--Adapted from the prayers of Martin Luther