

The 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation

Psalm 46

October 29, 2017 – Reformation Sunday

First Meditation “Luther’s Early Years”

Martin Luther began his career as a devout Catholic Priest. He was born in Eisleben on November 10, 1483 and baptized the next day. In 1488, at the age of five, he was enrolled in the “Latin School” in Mansfeld, and in 1501 he matriculated at the University of Erfurt where in 1505, at the strong suggestion of his father he began the study of Law.

It was later that same year that Luther found himself caught in a violent thunderstorm. He was knocked to the ground by a bolt of lightning, and he prayed to Saint Anne – “Saint Anne, help me. If you save me, I will become a monk.” He obviously did survive; and, over his father’s strong objection, Luther entered the Augustinian order in its Erfurt monastery.

Two years later in 1507, Luther was ordained a priest, and transferred to the town of Wittenberg where he began advanced studies in theology and scripture and taught entering students in the University.

Second Meditation “Luther’s Conflicted Conscience”

Luther continued to study and to teach in Wittenberg, but the more he studied and the more he contemplated, the more he had “issues” with certain practices of the Vatican. Chief among this was the sale of indulgences. Pope Leo X was struggling to finance the building of Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome. So he called for the sale of indulgences. (Actually the process was not quite that simple. There were a lot of politics involved with a German bishop seeking power and authority from Rome – authority over multiple dioceses. A lot of less than ethical actions were taking place, but we’ll leave those details for another time.)

Anyway, the church was selling indulgences – nice printed certificates that indicated that you had given money to the church, and because of that “gift” your sins had been absolved, and you would get a free ticket to heaven. These indulgences were being sold on street corners, much the way a hotdog vendor would sell hotdogs at a baseball game. But the church justified this. The church

said, “These are good works you’re doing for the church, and through good works you earn salvation.” And thus began the centuries old debate: Does one earn salvation by their works or by their faith in Christ?

These are the questions the troubled Martin Luther; and so, he did what any good professor would do. He called for a debate. He penned 95 Theses, 95 thoughts/questions; he wrote them in Latin, and posted them on the church door. Now, 95 may have been a bit over the top; but Martin was never known for brevity. However, the posting on the church door was not extreme. That was the Facebook Page of the day. If one wanted to debate an issue or raise a question, they posted it on the church door; and the mere fact that the theses were written in Latin signified that Luther intended this to be an issue discussed by the academic community. However, it didn’t take long for the theses to be translated into German. We’re not sure who did that translation. Some say Luther did it himself; others suggest it was a student or another professor. But soon, to use twenty-first century language, the 95 Theses went viral.

Third Meditation “Luther’s Struggle with the Church”

After the publishing of the 95 Theses, the sale of indulgences plummeted, and the authority of the church was seriously undermined. A year later, Luther was summoned to appear before his Cardinal in Augsburg to recant his claims that one is saved by faith alone, and not by works. He was told to recant his claims that church was indeed fallible in its claim of salvation by works, otherwise known as “works righteousness.” Luther refused.

In 1521, he was summoned to appear before the Diet of Worms. At the Diet a table was placed before him with all of his writings on it. He was asked, “Are these your writings?”; to which Luther answered in the affirmative. Then he was again asked, “Will you recant?” To this Luther answered, “On these grounds I neither can nor will revoke anything, for it is a grave, irreparable and dangerous thing to go against one’s conscience. May God help me. Amen.”

Then an interesting thing happened. The diet dismissed Luther, while they decided his fate. And while they were meeting in what would turn out to be a declaration of heresy and therefore a death sentence, Luther simply walked away; and not far outside of Worms, Luther’s protector, Prince Frederick the Wise of Saxony, had he kidnapped and hidden away in Wartburg castle.

Fourth Meditation “The Priesthood of All Believers”

It was during Luther’s time in Wartburg Castle that he formulated his second major theme of the Reformation. The first was “Justification by faith alone.” The second was – “The Priesthood of All Believers.” Luther stated that Christians do not need an intermediary, a priest, between them and God. All Christians should enter into a personal relationship with the deity. Christians should be encouraged to pray directly to God, and Christians should be allowed to read the bible and to worship in their own language.

Thus during the 300 days that Luther hide in Wartburg Castle, he translated the Bible into German; and beyond the theological and spiritual implications of that translation, the Luther Bible really became the standard for the modern German language. I might add that, in some ways, it’s thanks to Luther that this service today is not being conducted in Latin.

Fifth Meditation “The Reformation and Non-Lutherans”

The emergence of Protestantism in Europe was not entirely peaceful. Sadly some of the bloodiest wars in European history were fought in the name of religion. There was the Peasants Revolt of 1524. The Thirty Years War of the Seventeenth Century was fueled by both political and religious conflict. However, some resolution and peace in Central Europe resulted from the Augsburg Conference in 1555. It stated that whatever the religion of the ruler of a region was, that would be the religion of the region.

So what does all this mean to us, 500 years later? First, we can look to Luther as an example of God’s call. Luther never intended to start a new religion. Luther only wanted to reform the Catholic Church. That Augustinian monk from Wittenberg simply raised questions of conscience, and those questions changed the world. I also like to point out that Luther had a significant, and I believe, a positive effect on the Roman Catholic Church. In response to the Protestant Reformation, Pope Paul III convened the Council of Trent in 1545. That launched what was call the Counter-Reformation and has more recently been called the Catholic Reformation. The Council of Trent clarifies Catholic doctrine, abolished some of the most notorious abuses including the ramped sale of indulgences, and non-resident bishops. It defined the church’s position on the relationship of faith

and works in salvation; and, perhaps most notably, it called for much greater education of clergy. Oh, and by the way, the Council of Trent also forbade dueling.

So it is with mixed feeling that today I celebrate Reformation Day. I celebrate the reforms of the church which Luther ushered in. I celebrate the reforms in the Roman Catholic Church in response to the Protestant Reformation. And, at the same time, I am saddened by the history of religious wars, wars over which side has “the right way of worshiping the God of peace.” I am also saddened by the schism, the split in the church that came about as a result of the Reformation. As the Nicene Creed states, “I believe in the one holy catholic (that’s “catholic” with a small “c”) – I believe in the one holy universal and apostolic church.”

And so I echo the thoughts of Dean McIntyre of the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship as he says: “Our fractured denominations have entered into dialogue and cooperative activities that have brought us closer together. Today we may observe Reformation Day with a sense of moving toward unity and community. It is an opportunity to repent of the sins and excesses of the past and celebrate our common faith, even if we still cannot celebrate a common ritual and sacrament. Reformation today can represent healing of old wounds as, together, we all work to build and strengthen Christ’s church and love one another as Christ has loved us.

John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist Tradition spent some time in Germany, studying Lutheran doctrine and particularly the Lutheran views on justification by faith. Wesley stated that Luther was right – we are justified by faith and not by works; but, if we have the faith, we will do the works. Wesley also said, “In matter essential, unity; in matters non-essential, diversity; in all things love.” May it be so. May it be so for each of us; and may it be so for the church of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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