



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

What's the Big Deal about Luther? Psalm 46; Romans 1:16-17

From time to time it is pointed out that very few of us can name more than a handful of Nobel Peace Prize winners, *Time Magazine's* Person of the Year, Oscar or Grammy winners, or the World Series or Super Bowl champions more than a few years back. If we are honest, we might be hard pressed to name all of our local, state, and congressional representatives. Yet, all of these people have done notable things. Some of them have even contributed to the betterment of the world, but we don't think about them much, do we? One the other hand, every one of us can recall the name and face of a teacher, a neighbor, or friend who made a lasting impact on our lives, perhaps years, even decades, ago. In fact, that face is probably flashing through your mind right now. Am I right?

If we can easily forget notable people who make big headlines but remember ordinary folks who directly touch our lives, why should any of us know or care about a 16th century monk and professor of the Bible named Martin Luther? Quite frankly, many people know the name, not because of a German priest who lived 500 years ago, but because of his namesake who championed the cause of freedom for all people, a twentieth century Baptist minister named Martin Luther King.

This year, however, this month, people all over the world are talking about Martin Luther the Reformer and the nailing of his 95 Theses to the bulletin board door of the castle church in Wittenburg, an act which pierced the heart of the papacy and the Roman Catholic Church. It was an act which unwittingly set off what we know as the Protestant Reformation.

Born to peasant parents who made it possible for their son to obtain an education, Martin Luther was on track to study law. When a dear friend died and Luther himself narrowly escaped death by lightning in a fierce thunderstorm, the young man sought refuge and help in a monastery and fell in love with biblical, theological, and philosophical studies. He was a bright and impressive student who captured the attention of his professors. He was ordained a priest in the Church, awarded a doctorate in biblical studies, and was soon shaping younger minds and hearts at the University in Wittenburg.

Luther had a problem, however, one that we all share. He was a sinner. Luther's sinfulness tormented him. His trusted mentor Johann von Staupitz counseled him regularly to rely upon the mercy of a loving God rather than cower in fear of a vengeful God, but on this point, Luther was a slow learner. He agonized over his sinful state and certain fate. Confession, repentance, and absolution did him little good.¹ Happily, over time, the core of Luther's theology became centered on the conviction that sincere repentance yields divine forgiveness, a grace over which human intervention and mediation have no effect. Grace is a gift from God. Period. It cannot be earned or bought. It is a gift we receive through faith.

It was not surprising, then, when Pope Leo X's envoy Johann Tetzel came to the region of Saxony where Luther lived and taught, that he caught Luther's attention. Tetzel was selling indulgences to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the same glorious structure where people from around the world worship today. An indulgence was an act of pardon on behalf of the soul of a deceased person who was "stuck" in purgatory, a sort of fiery holding place where sins were purified. The practice began as a way of dealing with sin after baptism, and usually involved the doing of good works on behalf of the church or community. It soon became apparent that indulgences offered financial gain for the Church and Tetzel was a master salesman. Reportedly, his "advertising jingle was something like, "When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs!" Quite catchy, isn't it?! And a rather creative fundraising plan!

Professor Luther, freshly convinced that a soul is saved by grace alone through faith and not by any human action or merit, preached vehemently against the Pope's indulgences. On All Soul's Eve, October 31, 1517, five hundred years ago, Luther wrote a list of ninety-five items of discussion concerning the power of the Pope and the character of the Church. As was the custom, he nailed his list to the church door which served as a community bulletin board. Luther's desire was simply to begin a discussion about matters he thought were critical, but his list provoked other people to outrage. A firestorm of controversy was ignited and sides were formed. One group defended the practice of full papal authority in all matters of faith while Luther and many of his colleagues insisted on salvation by grace and the freedom granted to every believer through Jesus Christ.

¹Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, Third Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 301-11.

After conferences, debates, and trials, Luther was eventually excommunicated from the Church he loved and wanted to reform it for the better. The controversy stirred hearts and minds and caused people to think seriously about their faith and how it is lived out day by day. Distinctly new expressions of Christian belief and understanding grew up in the fertile soil of this Reformation and new churches were formed.

The years during which the Reformation took place were far from an idyllic time. Life was hard for the majority of people. Europe was undergoing vast changes but a relatively small group of people held the majority of wealth and the poor scraped by working largely for the landowners who also held political and, sometimes, religious power. Oppression was rampant and religion was frequently wedded to politics and wealth. People like Luther who criticized the Church were sometimes condemned, excommunicated, tortured, or even killed because of their understanding of faith. It was a dark time for the Christian Church.

At the same time, Luther's insistence upon grace and his desire that we be critically honest about how we live out our faith parted the clouds of those dark days. The Gospel was understood as a gift for all people and eventually scripture was translated into the language of the people. Ordinary folks began to learn to read so that the Bible became accessible to them for the first time. No longer were priests seen as the only doorway to God; instead, all people of faith became guides leading one another to Christ who is the true door to the divine. The doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers was born, an understanding that every follower of Christ is a minister of the Gospel we receive and proclaim with our lives.

The Christian family tree grew rapidly and there was no longer only one expression of Christian faith embodied in the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, new branches of the Body of Christ emerged throughout the world. In 1604, almost a century after Luther's humble act shook the Church, a group of dissenters who were unhappy with the marriage of church and state in the Church of England, met in a bakery in Amsterdam, worshiped together and baptized one another as believing adults. Baptists were born!

Martin Luther's desire was never to fracture the Christian Church. He grieved over what happened, and being cut off from the Church he loved wounded him deeply. He could easily have sung the words which Chase offered us earlier: "I could not see through the shadows ahead; so I looked at the cross of my Savior instead. I bowed to the will of the Master that day;

then peace came and tears fled away.”² The witness of scripture convinced Luther that salvation comes by grace through faith and this gift of God empowers us to live our faith. When pressed to recant his ideas or face excommunication, after a day of intense reflection, Luther answered his accusers and said, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me, here I stand. I cannot do otherwise, amen.”³

Martin Luther was far from perfect and anything but a saint. He could be argumentative, boisterous, and crude. He irritated both enemies and friends. Nevertheless, he took his faith seriously and was willing to think about it, talk about it, live it, and fight for it.

Five hundred years later, we do not *celebrate* the Protestant Reformation. There is never cause to celebrate a divide in the Christian Church. There is reason to *commemorate* the Reformation, however, because it has brought about much good and it is a reminder that our faith is always in need of being re-formed.

There is a popular understanding that the result of the Reformation is that Catholics and Protestants are at odds with one another. Not so! There are critical differences in how we understand the Church, especially in matters of polity and authority, but there is one undeniable point of agreement that we share: Jesus Christ is Lord! If anything, in these days, Pope Francis is bringing a fresh perspective to our ongoing need better understand one another and to re-form our faith day by day. Although there are differences in how Catholics and Protestants do things, and differences in how Protestants of various stripes worship and serve, what unifies us is of utmost importance. Our unity in Christ must not be denied!

Why make a big deal about Martin Luther? Why remember a bookish monk who lived five centuries ago and liked to nail questions on the door of the church house? Martin Luther is a big deal because he caused the Church to recognize that faith is not static. In fact, one of Luther’s “mottos” was: “Faith is a living, restless thing.”⁴

Faith is “a living, restless thing,” and aren’t we grateful it is! It always has been and must continue to be. Thanks to Martin Luther, we are here

²Ron Hamilton, “Rejoice in the Lord,” © Majesty Music.

³Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Mentor Books, 1950), 144.

⁴Bill J. Leonard, “A Place to Believe, Romans 1:16-18,” *Review and Expositor* (Winter 1989): 96.

today, a Baptist congregation that sometimes looks more Presbyterian or Episcopalian or even Catholic and acts as if every other Christian believer is a sister or brother regardless of the tag she or he wears—because they are. What’s the big deal about Luther? Just that without his conviction that all believers are to be priests to one another, we might not be here today. And I am so grateful that we are! Thanks be to God for Martin Luther—and for all the saints of God who passed on the faith so that we might believe today. Amen.

October 15, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Even though we sometimes do very little to make it happen, we do long to be nearer to you, O God. In our minds we know that you are always present, as near as the breath which fills our lungs, but our hearts sometimes feel as if you are far away, watching but not approaching. Teach us how to open our hearts, our minds, our eyes and ears, our lives to the reality of your nearness. Help us to see your creativity in the world around us, your joy in the ordinary events of life, your grief in the sorrow of the world, and your compassion in our own concerns. Help us to draw nearer to you, O God, so that we might enjoy your nearness to us.

Once again our week has been filled with the horrors of tragedy and we pray for the victims of wildfires as we continue to pray for the victims of wind and water. Death has come at the impulse of violence as well as in the natural course of life. Unrest has erupted in our own lives and fears threaten to undo us. In the stillness of this moment, O God, nudge us with your loving Spirit and refresh our sense of your care for us all.

In the ongoing blessing and curse that living together is for us all, guide us, O God. Being a nation of such vast diversity is not easy, but help us to remember that we are all alike in the basic needs and desires that are ours. Formed as a community by sheer proximity sometimes makes it difficult to get along. Our differences are pronounced and our needs are immediate, but help us to see that we are the answers to the problems around us and the source of the blessings we all desire. Brought together by our own choice, being family is often the hardest thing that we ever do, but remind us, O God, that what is of real value is worth the struggle. Help us to desire to be a blessing to one another and teach us how to love the people who are closest to us. Bless our families, our community, our nation, and our world with the grace that comes only from you.

Call us to times of holiness—recognizing your presence in our midst—so that we might draw nearer to you and to the people around us. Help us to be holy, aware of the ways you permeate our lives, so that we might live as if your love makes a difference for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.