



Lakeside Sermons

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

Three Cheers for the Reformation Luke 24:44-48; Galatians 2:15-20

If this were the year 1517 instead of 2017 and we lived in Europe, a priest would have just read that passage from Galatians. You might not actually know that, however, because the prayers, the blessings, and the scripture of the liturgy would all have been spoken in Latin, the language of the Church. Depending on the priest standing in the pulpit, he himself might have understood very little of what he had just read for not all priests were fluent in speaking or understanding Latin. It is doubtful that you would even know all of the books of the Bible, much less what those books said because most of you would not be able to read at all. Even if you could read somewhat, you wouldn't have a Bible of your own since very few were published at the time. Your only access to scripture was through the priest who read and interpreted the sacred writings for you.

When it was time to celebrate communion, no plates would be passed. You would go forward to receive communion as we sometimes do; yet, you would never touch the bread or be offered a cup to hold. The priest would be afraid that your oafish hands, calloused by hard work, might spill the blood of Christ or drop the Savior's body. So the priest would dip the bread into the cup with a spoon and then place it on your tongue, which we know is a form of intinction.

In fact, if we were living in the year 1517, you would have little to say about your faith or your standing before God. It was the priest who baptized you into the Church as an infant. If you sinned, it was the priest who offered you the opportunity for confession and absolution. When thinking about the afterlife, it was the priest who, with the Pope's approval, could sell you an indulgence to speed you or a deceased loved one on your way to heaven. The Christian faith was spread far and wide, but it was too precious, too fragile, to be placed into the hands of the people—people like you and me.

However, if we were living in Europe in the year 1517, our religious life would be about to change. Five hundred years ago next week, a young monk named Martin Luther walked with a friend to the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany. He nailed a list of grievances to the bulletin board door in order to

prompt a discussion about certain practices of the Church. That simple act, innocuous as it seemed on that day which was also All Hallows Eve, caused a seismic tremor in the Church, a shaking of the foundations of the faith. Luther was ridiculed, attacked, and excommunicated for his ideas, but a shoot had already sprung off of the tree of the Christian Church and the Protestant Reformation rapidly grew.

There were many reasons that the Church in that day and time needed to be reformed as it does in every day and every time. Happily those results have been passed on to us. The most significant benefit of the work of Luther and the other reformers who joined or followed him is that the practice of religion and the experience of faith was put back into the hands of the people. The motto of the Reformation became what is known as “the *solas*”: *sola scriptura, sola fide, and sola gratia*—scripture alone, faith alone, and grace alone. They became the three cheers of the Reformation around which we rally today. Scripture Alone! Faith Alone! Grace Alone!

The Reformers insisted that scripture alone is our source and authority for faith. No pope, no council, no clergy or committee can in and of themselves dictate the parameters of faith. Only scripture as the revealed word of God has that authority. We have also been given the gift of scripture and the freedom and responsibility to study and interpret it for ourselves. If anything has caused rifts in the Christian Church over the centuries, it has been the issue of scripture. At times insight into the meaning of scripture has been held by a privileged few, those scholars and clergy who had benefit of formal training. Luther and others realized, however, that scripture is a gift from God given to us all as a record of God’s revelation of himself to humanity. It is important, therefore, that we read this book that speaks to our lives. It is important that we study and discuss it, relying upon one another for insight and guidance, but never giving over our right to interpret the written word. The Bible contains the stories of people like ourselves who struggled with faith and who enjoyed the triumph of faith. It reveals how God has dealt with us and gives us clues as to how God continues to relate to us today. Scripture has been placed into our hands as a great spiritual resource and we ought not neglect it.

Baptists are fond of saying that we have no creed but the Bible. Scripture is very important to us for we believe that the Bible is our “final authority in matters of faith and practice.”¹ That is to say that in the pages of

¹“Article on the Scriptures,” *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: The Southern Baptist Convention, 1963).

the Bible we find guidance for how we are to live the Christian life. That is not to say that the Bible is clear in all matters of living nor that it addresses all of the circumstances and issues with which we deal today. It does, however, offer us examples of how other believers have handled the challenges placed before them.

We believe that the Bible is a sacred text, but we do not worship it. It records for us God's self-revelation, but it is not the embodiment of God. Scripture points us to God-in-Christ, the ultimate revelation, but it is not that revelation itself. Scripture is a great gift to us, for in it we see our own lives and struggles and hopes and redemption mirrored in the lives of other believers. But scripture's purpose is to direct us to our greatest gift which is salvation through faith in Christ. To deify the Bible is an abuse of this sacred gift. Scripture alone, interpreted and understood by people of faith, is our guide for how to live our faith.

Ten years before he unwittingly launched the Reformation, while walking along a dusty road, Martin Luther suddenly found himself in the midst of a violent thunderstorm. He was struck by lightning and thrown to the ground. Without thought, reacting instinctively as most of us would, he cried out to heaven, "St. Anne help me, I will become a monk."² Thinking that God had hit him hard to get his attention, Luther made his vow in order to save his life. Leaving his studies in law at the University of Erfurt, he entered a monastery where he diligently sought to "out monk the monks." His parents were not at all happy for they wanted him to become a successful lawyer in order to care for them in their old age. An oath was an oath, however, and Luther was determined to be the best monk ever. He studied harder, he prayed harder, he worked harder than anyone else in the monastery. He even repented harder, one time climbing on his knees the steps to the famed "Pilate's Judgement Hall" in Rome, kissing each step as he went. He did everything he could to be in a right relationship with God, but he found no satisfaction for his spirit.

Like many of us, Luther was persistent. When his works did not seem to gain him favor with God he tried to establish a right relationship through penance. Knowing that he was a sinner and that sin kept him from God, Luther believed the only way to please God was to punish himself. He prayed and fasted as few monks ever had. Nevertheless, Luther saw the chasm between humanity and God growing wider and wider with himself at the bottom of the ravine of the damned. He could see no good within himself.

² Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), p. 28. All other citations of events from Luther's life are gleaned from this work.

There was no evidence of divine favor. All he felt was a tendency toward rebellion against God. He could see no hope of reconciliation, and drew closer to despair.

Luther held before himself the image of a god who could never be appeased, who always wanted one more prayer, one more good deed, one more sacrifice. He viewed God as being so majestic beyond humanity that humanity had no hope whatsoever of attaining God's expectations. Luther tried as best he could to atone for his sins through self-deprivation and chastisement. He beat up on himself for the things he had done wrong, hoping that God would notice the punishment he had inflicted on himself and refrain from any further punishment. But he really did not believe he was worthy of God's favor. He did not think he was good enough to be included in the family of God.

The next step Luther took was a frightening one. He decided that he could not love God because God was unlovable. How could he love a Being who was not just, who did not treat everyone fairly, who was capricious in his actions and biased in his favor? Luther decided that he did not love God after all, and came to the terrifying realization that he must actually hate God.

Have you ever wondered how you can possibly love God in light of the things in this world we attribute to God. We see the triumph of people whose unbelief is bold. We see scoffers rise to heights of power and success. We see innocent people hurt by cruel people. We see faithful people die too young and hateful people live too long. We hear powerful people speak God's name and we watch them carelessly deny God with their actions. We watch as disasters wipe out homes and livelihoods and lives. And we wonder if God is behind all this—any of this, if God even allows these things to happen, how can we love such a God? How can we be united to a God who does not even follow his own laws for the creation he has made?

This blasphemy caused Luther deep despair. He so wanted to love God and be united to him, but he did not know how. Everything he had tried had failed. Eventually he felt that God had failed as well. Luther's spiritual counselor was a wise man who encouraged Luther to shift his attention toward others. He urged him to study for his doctor's degree, to preach, and to teach Bible at the University. Luther did so, and found joy in what he did. In one course he systematically taught the Psalms. When he reached the Twenty-second Psalm, he read the words and was so taken with the cry (which he believed to be Christ's), "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." He resonated with the apparent feelings of abandonment experienced

by Jesus and suddenly related to Christ in a new way. For the first time he understood that the only way for Christ to feel abandoned was to feel sinful, like he himself felt. And the only way Christ could feel sinful was to take on himself the sins of all humanity. Suddenly a new image of God came into view for Luther. No longer was the demanding, vengeful, God sitting on the throne of heaven; instead, it was the redeeming Lamb of God who watched over him. It was a God whom he was to love because it was a God who loved him. And all he had to do was believe, believe that God loved him enough to come in the Christ to suffer and conquer sin. All he had to do was have faith that God's compassion held no stock in what one accomplished or how religious one might become. He only had to believe that he was worthy enough to be in God's family because God had claimed him as son and loved him as child. All he had to do was believe. Luther discovered the great gift that salvation is through faith alone and not by works. In other words, our salvation is not dependent upon who we are or what we do; it is a gift from God received by faith. Faith alone is what God asks of us.

That realization led to the third cheer of the Reformation which is that our salvation is a gift of grace alone. It is nothing we can do for ourselves. It is not something a priest or minister can secure or deny us. It is the gift of God.

Such a gift is the source of ultimate freedom. Realizing that we ourselves can do nothing to earn our salvation is a liberating discovery. No longer do we have to keep accounts of our good deeds and mistakes to see which way the balance tips. God has made known to us in Jesus Christ that his grace is sufficient for our needs. When we sin, there is forgiveness if we are repentant. When we are confused about which way to go, there is guidance and support. When we feel as if we are alone on our journey, we discover to our delight that God has been with us all along. In gratitude for this gift, we learn to trust in God's grace even more, to give more attention to our faith, and to live with grace toward one another.

The sixteenth century Church was not alone in needing to be re-formed. Faith at any time needs to grow and change. Luther and the other Reformers simply offered us some clear guides to help us on our journey. The gift of scripture will inform and guide us. Faith in God will open our lives to the salvation God offers. And the grace of God will provide all that we need to live and serve God faithfully day by day. Scripture alone. Faith alone. Grace alone. Three cheers for the Reformation—the reformation of our lives! Amen.

October 22, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy God, Creator of all things, we come to worship this day realizing that we have so much for which to be thankful. The bounty of the earth rises to meet us with but little of our labor. The prosperity and freedom we take for granted are unfathomable to many around the world. Our lives are filled with relationships which bring joy and fulfillment. We are flooded by opportunities to work, to worship, to study, to travel, to enjoy. May our gratitude be the occasion for our confession that everything we have that is good and beautiful and joyful is the product of your love and grace. We acknowledge, Lord, that were our entire lives devoted to acts of thanksgiving and praise, your generosity would be infinitely greater still.

In this season of commemoration, we also offer our thanks for those great saints who had the courage and the wisdom to bring renewal to your Church. For their steadfast conviction that our redemption comes through your grace and not by any work that we might perform to earn it; for their faith in believing that we could communicate with you and be called by you without the need for a human mediator; for their courage to stand against the abuses of government and church hierarchies; and for their wisdom in insisting that the Bible should be accessible to every believer who seeks to encounter you in the witness of Scripture, we are grateful, O God. Give us the courage to live this faith and to preserve these principles that our children might continue to enjoy these cherished freedoms.

Even as we offer our praise and gratitude, Loving God, we understand that ours is a world where many suffer more pain than we are likely to experience and have needs greater than we can comprehend. For those who live under the shadow of illness, death, and grief, we pray for your healing. For those whose homes and communities are not safe havens but rather places of fear and violence, we pray for your peace. For those whose minds and bodies and futures are stunted by a lack of food and education and hope, we pray for your mercies. Forgive us, O Lord, when we do not see, when we do not speak, when we do not care for all of your children. May we speak for those who have no voice. May we stand for those who have no strength. May we make in this congregation and in our lives a welcome place for all who are in need of light and hope and peace. In the name of Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

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