

Reformation Sunday 2020
October 25, 2020

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, today is Reformation Sunday for us Lutherans. It's the Sunday right before October 31.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses against the sale of indulgences to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg Germany, which led to a series of events that resulted in the Reformation and the establishment of the Lutheran Church, which was a derogatory name at the time.

Luther thought we should be called the Evangelical Catholic Church, as opposed to the Roman Catholic Church. Evangelical means sharing the good news of God's love, Catholic means universal or all encompassing, and Church means the gathering of believers. Basically Luther wanted members of this new Church to bear the good news of God's unconditional love to the whole world.

It's important to remember today that Luther never meant to start a new Church. He was looking for discussion and ended up getting kicked out.

Luther was very naive when he posted the 95 theses to the church door. He actually didn't know that the pope was behind the sale of indulgences. You can imagine his shock and dismay when he realized what was really going on.

So, what are indulgences and why do they matter?

In the beginning, indulgences were innocent enough. They were basically a thank offering given after confession and forgiveness. You confessed your sins to the priest, he pronounced forgiveness, and then you would give a free will offering of whatever amount, and then you would receive a receipt, an indulgence.

As time went on, the offering of indulgences started to change. Instead of being something given after forgiveness as a thank offering, it became penance. You had to pay for your sins, literally, with your money.

Now, I hope you can see the theological problem with that, because it goes really deep. This is where the wrathful God comes into play. "You must pay for your sins! Either with money now or burning in Purgatory for thousands and thousands of years later." It totally discredits Jesus and all that he has done.

For Luther and the people in what is modern day Germany, life was very hard in the 16th Century. There were plagues, horrible poverty, and the Turks were knocking at their door. Life was not easy. With the idea that God was a wrathful God, they could only imagine that the horrible life they were living was because God was against them.

The Church fed into this by sending specialized priests to them and who put on huge dramatic plays showing people burning in Purgatory, or even worse going to hell. Life was already a living hell. People couldn't bear the thought of burning in Purgatory for thousands of years after having such a hard life. In desperation, they would give all they had to buy these indulgences for themselves or the ones they loved.

This is the world Luther was born into, a world full of fear. And as if that wasn't bad enough, Martin Luther also suffered from depression and was abused as a child. Not only was he beaten by his parents, but by his teachers as well. All Luther knew was wrath. He didn't know love at all.

So, when he was riding home one night from the university where he was studying law and a lightning storm surrounded him and lightning struck the tree next to him, Luther thought that the wrathful God was after him. He was sure he was on his way to Purgatory or hell, so he prayed desperately to St. Anne, Mother Mary's mom, to protect him and then he made an oath to become a monk if he survived, which he did.

Much to his father's dismay and ire, Luther became an Augustinian monk, where in constant fear he drove the head of the monastery crazy with his constant confessions. He was really worried about further suffering in the afterlife and he knew for every sin he was not forgiven he would have to spend that much time burning.

Exasperated with his constant confessions, the head of the monastery sent Luther off to study the scriptures for himself. Remember, it's thanks to Luther and the other Reformers, and Guttenberg, that you can pull a Bible off the shelf in your first language and read it today. That was not the case in Luther's day. In Luther's day, they were hand written texts in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin that could only be found in the libraries of seminaries and kings.

So, Luther went off to study and that's where he came across Paul's letter to the Romans. We have part of it today. That is where we find the Lutheran rally cry of

“Saved by grace through faith not works.” You cannot buy or earn salvation, because it is a free gift of love from God!

With that, Luther’s head exploded – not literally, but figuratively. Have you ever been in that spot where everything you thought you knew turns out to be a lie? For the first time in his life, Luther knew what real love is, and with that he knew joy, and when you’ve got the joy joy joy joy down in your heart, it cannot be contained and you can never be held captive in fear again.

After receiving his doctorate degree, Luther went to Wittenberg to teach at the university and preach at St. Mary’s. Because he was a university professor, Luther enjoyed debate, so he posted his 95 debate topics in Latin on the Castle Church door as an invitation for scholarly debate around indulgences. He did it on Oct. 31, because he knew all of the scholars would be at church the following day for the day of obligation, All Saints Day, on Nov. 1.

When the printers saw what Luther had posted, they ripped it down, translated it into German, and sold it to everyone who would buy a copy, which was just about every person who could read, and that’s when the world as they knew it began to change – not only in Germany, but in all of the Roman Empire and all of Christendom.

The Church was in need of reform, people knew that for a hundred years. It had strayed far away from the Gospel, and the good news is that when that happens, the Holy Spirit intercedes through people like Martin Luther and others who came before and after him.

Today is a red day, a Holy Spirit day, because just as the book of Acts is about the Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles, so Reformation Sunday is all about the Holy Spirit acting through Luther and other reformers in order to bring us back to our purpose of sharing the good news of God’s love with the world. There is no wrath. There is no fear.

Every time we put stipulations on God’s love, every time we put up rules or laws between people and God, we go against the Gospel. We go against all that God has already done for us and the Holy Spirit will not let that stand.

Pope Leo the 10th knew what he was doing was wrong, but he wanted the Vatican built. He wanted the Sistine Chapel finished. He wanted it to be as ornate as the villas he grew up in in Florence. Leo X was a Medici after all. He had been living

in the Renaissance his entire life, while the peasants of Germany remained in the Dark Ages, largely thanks to him.

Leo X, as the head of the Church, the descendant of Peter, was supposed to be bringing good news to the poor, but instead he was robbing them blind so that he could have what he wanted. So, when Luther correctly says that since the Pope has all of the merit of Jesus and all of the saints, he should set everyone in Purgatory free for free, Leo X has a major fit. How is he going to pay for his palace if people don't buy indulgences?!

So, he orders Luther tried knowing that it would either lead to him recanting what he said or to his death. Either way his money making scheme would be intact. But, Luther doesn't recant. Instead he says, "Here I stand. I can do no other. Lord help me."

Throughout the New Testament Jesus says, "You can either serve God or you can serve money. You cannot serve both." Leo chose to serve money. Luther chose to serve God. And so, every year on Reformation Sunday, we are invited to examine ourselves. Are we serving God or are we serving money. If we are not serving God by sharing the good news of God's free unconditional love, then we need reform, and we ask the Holy Spirit to guide us in that endeavor.

The purpose of the Church is to proclaim the universal unconditional love for all of creation to all of creation so that they too will have joy in their innermost being, just as Luther experienced in the library that day.

God's love sets everyone free from all bondages, especially the bondage of fear, and when you have been set free from fear, no one can manipulate you, no one can hold you captive, because all you know is love.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, makes us free through his life, death, and resurrection, with the proclamation that God is for us, never against us, and because of that we are free indeed – justified and united to God for all of eternity.

So, let's go share that good news with everyone and everything we meet so that death will be reformed into life, which is the very heart of the Gospel.

Thanks be to God. Amen.