

Reformation Sunday  
October 29, 2006

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*Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36*

Today, the last Sunday in October, is the day Lutherans and other Protestants around the world celebrate Reformation Sunday. This is the only Sunday we take to observe an event that is not biblical. We actually are remembering the events of October 1517 where a German priest by the name of Martin Luther nailed a piece of paper to the door of the local church on the eve of All Saints Day. The words on that piece of paper, 95 statements, were intended to spark discussion among the students and teachers at his university. Instead they sparked the Protestant Reformation and a new era in the history of Christianity.

Sometimes when we Lutherans get to Reformation Sunday, we start our celebration assuming that everyone knows the story. But I suspect that isn't necessarily true. So, if you have heard this story before, I hope you will listen again for something new.

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Saxony, a part of what is now Germany. He was the son of a successful businessman and grew up and received a good education. His father was known to be a very strict father who wanted Martin to become a lawyer, so Martin headed off to University to study law.

Until one day, when Martin was riding from one place to another and was caught in a terrible thunderstorm. He prayed fervently to be saved from the storm and vowed that, if he was spared, he would enter the monastery. Which he did, in 1505. He entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. He became a monk and tried to live a life that was pleasing to God. He was ordained a priest in 1507.

Unfortunately Martin was also keenly aware of his sinfulness. He felt that no matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, he could never be good enough for God to love him. He spent most of his time either going to confession or carrying out his penances. One story has it that he would go to confess a sin and then was assigned the job of cleaning out the toilets. While cleaning those toilets he found himself having resentful thoughts for having to do this punishment so then he had to go back to confession to confess his resentful thoughts and receive yet another punishment. It was a vicious circle that he saw no way out of.

For you see, Luther lived at a time when the message being given to believers was heavy on guilt and shame. God was portrayed as a righteous judge who rightly condemned us for our sins. And the church proclaimed that unless you believed a certain way and practiced a certain set of religious practices you would surely burn in eternal punishment. Luther searched for a loving God, for some assurance that his sins were forgiven, even as he lived in fear of the God who only judged and condemned him.

Eventually his spiritual teacher, a priest named John von Staubitz, sent him to study the Scriptures. Luther was sent to Wittenburg Germany to teach Scripture. To teach something, you first have to learn it thoroughly yourself. So in his preparations for

teaching, Luther finally encountered God's Word in a way that finally liberated him from the God who only judged and condemned.

Luther finally began to see that when the Scriptures spoke of the righteousness of God, it didn't mean only God's perfection and God's perfect right to judge and condemn our imperfection. God's righteousness is also about God's goodness, God's mercy, God's forbearance. God's righteousness is revealed in Jesus, in God's willingness to save us from our own sinfulness and certain punishment through the merit of Jesus' death on the cross.

The aha! moment came when Luther finally realized he could give up trying to be perfect because he was never going to make it. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. That's just the way human beings are. But, it is God's action that makes things right between God and humanity. It is God's gift of forgiveness, it is God's infinite, loving kindness that makes things right. No matter how many times a person goes to confession, or receives Communion, they are never going to make up for their sins. Only God can do that. And God already did it, in Jesus. All we have to do is trust the promises of God, God's promise to love and forgive us.

Needless to say, from his position as a professor at a university, Luther had the opportunity to teach his students about his understanding of the Bible. He had a chance to talk about the power and authority of God's Word, over and against the power and authority of the priests and the church. Luther also preached at the local church and there began to spread his message among the people. Not surprisingly, Luther was not the only person who longed to know of a loving God instead of a condemning God. His message was called the Good News, the Evangelical. That a person didn't need to do anything to receive God's forgiveness and loving kindness except to believe, to have faith, that God loves you.

Except, here was the place that Luther got into trouble with the religious authorities of his day. The Church in Luther's day was making a pretty hefty profit from selling what were called indulgences, little pieces of paper from the pope in Rome that said your sins were forgiven. People who lived in fear of eternal damnation could easily be convinced that they needed to buy these bits of paper. With their purchase of an indulgence they could either ensure their own liberation from eternal suffering or to liberate a deceased loved one who might be waiting to be released to heaven by the prayers, good works, and indulgences bought by their loved ones on earth.

It was kind of a racket. So on the eve of All Saint's Day, a feast day of the church when Luther knew lots of people would be coming to church, Luther tacked up a list of his thoughts about the practice of selling and buying indulgences. He didn't agree that forgiveness could come from the pope, because forgiveness came from God. He didn't agree that one could buy forgiveness, because God has given it freely. That list of statements is what is called the 95 thesis, and that day, October 31<sup>st</sup> has come to be known as Reformation Day. Because on that day, the church began to be reformed. The message of God's loving kindness and forgiveness was reclaimed, and re-proclaimed. This day is looked to as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, the new era in the history of the church.

Now, I would like to be able to say that that solved everything. But we are all still human. We all still sin. We all still need forgiveness. And there are still people who will use the scare tactics to try to manipulate and take advantage of people. There are still people who are convinced that God is only a perfect being who can rightly judge their imperfection and condemn them to eternal punishment. It is a supreme irony, or tragedy depending on how you look at it, that some churches have come to use this time of year, and Halloween, to turn the volume up, not down, on that kind of scare tactic. The Hell Houses that have become so popular of late are the exact opposite of the Good News that Luther was talking about. Maybe we should all be going out to these places and putting up signs that say "Don't go in, this is not what God is like" I'm pretty sure that that would go over with the folks who run these places about as well as Luther's 95 thesis went over with the church in his day. He was excommunicated and had to live in hiding for a while.

But God's message of love will not be stopped, not by corrupt religious leaders, not by false doctrines. God's message of love has spread to the whole world. And lest we think that Luther's followers are just a bunch of northern Europeans and their North American descendants, Lutherans are the largest denomination in the world. There are something over 66 million Lutherans worldwide. The Lutheran church is alive and well on every continent. Everywhere there are people who live in fear of a God who only judges them there are people longing to hear that God loves them and forgives them.

So the work of the Reformation goes on. Around the world, and around the corner, there are people who still are held captive by their shame and guilt. They don't yet know the freedom that is theirs through God's Word, through God's forgiveness.

That's where we come in, that's where our story and Luther's story connect. We are the ones who have come to know of God's grace, and we are the ones who are called to stand up, to speak out, to share the Good News of a loving God. Not in far-flung places, just right here, to that person who still struggles to know God's love for them. God wants them to know that God's grace is for them too. God's righteousness, God's goodness, is sufficient for them too. God's Word can set them free. May God use each one of us to make it so. Amen