

499 Years Later—Thank You Martin Luther
Romans 5: 1-11
May 22, 2016, Scottish Reformation Sunday
W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

Today our annual celebration of Scottish Sunday takes a distinctively eastern turn from the land of the Scots to middle Europe and the start of the Reformation movement by “The Reformer of Wittenberg”—Martin Luther. Next year on October 31, 2017 the world will pause to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation when Luther posted his “95 Theses,” on the church door in Wittenberg. Most historians see it as more than a spark that started something. It was indeed the lighting of the fuse that would literally blow-up the religious landscape over the western world. Following Luther in Wittenberg over the next two decades came John Calvin (the French church leader) in Geneva; Ulrich Zwingli (the Swiss free thinker) in Zurich and John Knox (the Presbyterian reformer in Edinburgh).

But what does one do with such a large historically significant event like the Reformation? It has had such immense influence and contested interpretation credited with the rise of the modern nation state, liberalism, capitalism, religious wars, tolerance, democracy, individualism, subjectivism, pluralism, freedom of conscience, modern science, secularism and the list could go on and on. Scholars and journalist will revisit many of the historical places, documents written and people who were the major players.

A good question would be, Why at this time in the 16th century and why this man? Luther stood in a long line of reformers who had tried to move the church from its medieval view of God and the world. But earlier reformers had failed either being ex-communicated from the church at best or burned at the stake for their heresy at worst. So why did this time and this man have a different response?

The answer was in the politics and the personalities of the Reformation. This event did not stand alone isolated in Wittenberg, but encompassed all aspects of life from the political to the economics, to the very social fabric that made up society. If you had the socio-political power, you got to call the religious shots. It was a time when whole country sides became Lutheran or Reformed overnight—just convince the local power people to come over to your side, withstand the pope, and put your people in charge of every village church.

What drove Luther to reformation? Luther was tormented by one question, “How shall a sinful man stand in the presence of a righteous God? Using all the means of medieval Catholicism, he sought to guarantee for himself a place in heaven, but he could never guarantee his place in heaven. He could always imagine himself as a better monk or a more faithful confessor.

Today, I don’t imagine many people feel guilty before Almighty God. Our culture which is very different from that of the 16th century precludes that possibility. But we do feel guilty in America about other things. Guilty that we have not been good parents, guilty that we have not been

financially successful, guilty that we have not been socially accepted. Even in church we feel guilty because the church is not really what it says it is, the people of God.

The 16th century monk wanted to guarantee heaven by being a successful monk or by making a pilgrimage or by confessing all of his sins. Today, we would like to guarantee heaven by successful homes, by successful careers, by successful churches, by a successful reformation of society. Many attempt to guarantee their righteousness by joining a movement and proclaiming its slogans, the 21st century counter-part of the medieval pilgrimage.

But we no more than the 16th century monk, can merit heaven. Even when we do succeed, our success always opens up new possibilities of goodness that finally elude us—and our causes turn out to be less righteous than we thought.

I think unwittingly the medieval Roman church was into a doctrine of earning your way into heaven. If you did enough good works, if you bought enough holy relics, if you would only ... and the list went on and on. Luther came to the conclusion as many others did, that we could not earn or buy our way into the presence of God. After years of searching one day he found the words in Romans 5 those life-changing words, “Since we are justified by faith, we have this peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have received access to grace,” the gift of God to each of us. Not earning salvation but receiving it as a gift.

What is true individually is true of public life as well. There is no guarantee that love shall triumph in history, that race conflicts will be resolved, that terrorism will be overcome, that those we consider our enemies will be defeated. The human situation is such both in the public and in the private life that none of us can live in serenity and peace except by the assurance of grace.

No one can guarantee the future, but we can live in the confidence of the grace and love of God. This is the gospel for those who live in a merit, success-oriented society. This is the gospel for those who live under the pressure of historical and physical forces that overwhelm them, for persons who strive to do their best, but who know that their best is not good enough.

What did the people get from the Reformer of Wittenberg? They were interested in security keeping the Turks from Istanbul at bay and interested economically in cutting off revenues for indulgences from the pope. He also called them to a sense of German nationalism which helped keep the movement alive. Today people look back on Luther as the all-time master of listening to colloquial speech and feeding it back as part of a new literary Germany, he translated the Bible into their native tongue. He significantly impacted the German language for the next 400 years.

What did the people get? As Martin Marty (a church historian) noted, “If they were moved, they were moved only so far. Before his death in 1546 Luther had given up on his fellow Wittenbergers. In world-weary lines he complained of their overindulgence in the beer he also enjoyed, the lavish costumes they wore at the dances he had encouraged, their swinish gluttony and their neglect of the things of God. Records from the time show that spiritual carelessness lived on in the towns where Lutheran leaders had visitations, and that they had to fall back on legalisms when the gospel did not produce its effects.” (*The Christian Century*, October 26, 1983, pg. 962)

Back in Scotland, where our Presbyterian faith was born (you knew I would get there eventually didn't you?), whose bravest children had been slaughtered at Culloden as the Scots battled the British over which royal house would rule: the house of Stuart or the house of Hanover. Politics and religion were always mixed in Scotland, and now were eking out existence on a diet of boiled grass and nettles. In the city wynds of Edinburgh and Glasgow human beings were dying of starvation and children, little more than serfs, were working eighteen hours a day in the scorching heat of factories and chimneys.

How could they have known that the seeds Luther, Calvin and John Knox had planted for the world two centuries before were about to sprout? How little did they know that the English Puritans were deriving their revolutionary freedom from the thundering Scot, celebrating his writings by putting them into practice? Knox said the individual Christian had a right to rebel against the injustice of the State, and of the church. It was a God-given duty to fight for what was right. He said he found it back in Exodus and in Kings.

Knox said it was the duty of the individual to be free, free from Monarch and from bishops, even free from preachers, he said, who did not preach the gospel or who did not faithfully perform the duties of the kirk or church. With that "First Blast," armed rebellion was possible where it had not been before. We owe a debt to Knox.

Now let's turn the page again from old John Knox and come closer to home. I know it is a jump from the 16 and 18th centuries to the modern day but come along with me. From Knox to another Presbyterian the late "Mister Rogers" of children's TV fame. He taught children for almost forty years about the grace of God and how God loves each and every one of us. Who hasn't seen at least one "Mr. Rogers" program? One of "Mr. Roger's" songs was about "being fancy on the inside" regardless of how we looked on the outside. We have the DNA of a precious strand of life which goes all the way back to the beginning, whenever and whatever dark and deep abyss it was, where all that was in life became a living breathing soul. That is how great we really are: "fancy on the inside, no matter what we are like on the outside." For while I have my mother's faith, and my father's way with people, and my grandfather's mind for detail and business, and my uncle George's sparking blue eyes—P.T. Forsythe once wrote, "What do I have anyway, that I have not received?" It all has come from somewhere, some thing, somebody; but mostly it belongs to Jesus Christ, then to us by him as companions and as friends along the most high and holy road that we have a right to walk.

The only clergy person to sign the Declaration of Independence was the Rev. John Witherspoon, a striking man with a potbelly and somewhat homely in appearance his biographers would write. He was 53 years old, a Scots Presbyterian who became noted in education and headed the College of New Jersey at Princeton. James Madison and James Monroe would later be students of his.

When he was about to sign the Declaration, others said, "Don't do it, John. You will ruin your reputation! You will never succeed in the ministry! Your pride and prestige will topple! Your influence as an educator will be over, and you'll probably lose your life!" Old John said, "Rubbish! I'll sign it. I'd rather nail my life to this kind of cross than let it be blown about and buffeted by whatever petty little breeze comes along.

When the Liberty Bell was rung for the first time, it was not rung to warn the nation of peril or to tell the people to take cover. It was rung to alert the people to come into the open and be counted.

The bagpipes have played for centuries in the valley of the Highland—in Glen Shea and Glen Coe and other places, not to warn the clans to run and hide in fear—but to call them to be up and about the march to glory, whatever the cost. The bagpipes are not for ordinary days, not even for leading worship. They are for the great frontiers of emotion, or to inspire great devotion in battle, as a dirge for funerals, or for hilarity at a dance.

Stand up and be counted for something by the grace of God, Knox and Calvin and Luther would all have liked that I think. “Christians should be taught that one who gives to the poor, or lends to the needy, does a better action than if he purchases indulgencies.”

Luther played it again and sang it again whenever he challenged himself and others with the notion that they were best, or only free when they relied on God and did not rely or trust in themselves.

Like others before him, Luther did not always live up to the high ideals of the gospel. He fell back on his old prejudices, his hatreds, and his pettiness’s. Luther was often a person of contradictions whose mixed legacy left some things worse.

Yet wherever the presence of God is felt and sensitive souls are open to experiences like Luther’s, there is room for a reckless grasp of grace. The old radical of Wittenberg somehow transcended his own bondage to the present, he brought to us

a strange language and a new grammar.... For God’s will is, because we are to be new persons, that we should also have other and new thoughts, minds and understandings, and not regard anything in the light of reason, as reason is for the world, but as it is before God’s eyes, and take our cue from the future, invisible, new nature for which we have to hope and which is to come. (Martin Luther, 1483—1546)