

Proper 25 A (Reformation Sunday) October 29, 2017 St. Christopher
Matthew 22:34-46

My sisters and brothers in Christ,

The Lutheran Church celebrates Reformation Sunday today. It's actually the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, in Saxony, on October 31, 1517. There is no similar commemoration in the Episcopal Church even though the Anglican Church of the 16th century was very much part of the Reformation. Let's look at some of the background leading to the Reformation.

From May through September this year, the New Testament readings have been mainly from Paul's Letter to the Christians in Rome. That prompted me to re-read the entire Letter to refresh my memory. When I reached the 17th verse of Chapter 1, I was struck by something. Since this was the Bible I had used in seminary for my courses, it has a lot of notes that I wrote in the margins. And there it was: I had underlined verse 17, and in the margin I had written: "Luther added 'alone'." (He added the word "alone.") What does verse 17 say?

Paul originally wrote: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith: as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'." My marginal note was a reminder that Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic monk, had added the word "alone" making the sentence read: "The one who is righteous will live by faith *alone*." Paul also wrote, in the 3rd chapter: "a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law." Martin Luther amended that to read: "a person is justified by faith *alone* apart from works prescribed by the law." When Luther was challenged that the word "alone" was not in the original Greek manuscript of Paul's Letter to the Romans, Luther is reported to have responded: "it belongs there if the translation is to be clear and vigorous...." (He was not one to mince words.)

But remember the context of Paul's Letter. Paul was raised a Jew and he was writing this Letter around the year 55 or 58, when most followers of Christ were still Jews. Paul was arguing that merely living according to the Hebrew Law was not enough for salvation. Paul believed that through Christ, God was acting powerfully to save both Jew and Gentile – that God offered righteousness and life that were to be received *by faith*. The righteousness of God is not something we can buy or earn – the righteousness of God is God's gift to us – unearned and undeserved: it is grace. Faith is the sole condition of salvation – faith in God's saving righteousness – justification by faith. And in that Letter to the Romans, Paul declared that justification comes by faith apart from works and deeds prescribed by the Hebrew Law. Paul pointed to the path for salvation through *belief* in Christ. Followers of Jesus did not need the Hebrew Law – such as observing kosher food cleanliness rules, or Jewish religious feasts, or the Jewish rite of circumcision. Salvation came through faith, not by adherence to the Law.

It always helps me to remember that some people went too far and misunderstood Paul – they thought he meant you did not have to do works or deeds of *any kind* as part of your faith. But recall for a moment the Letter of James, written about 30 years after Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans – James argued against this very error. Listen to his words: "what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them; 'Go in peace – keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.... For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also

dead.” The Letter of James. Martin Luther once declared that the Letter of James should be deleted from the New Testament.

Our Anglican theology – our Episcopal understanding – is that if you have faith, if you believe in Christ, then good works will flow naturally from that belief. That’s what being Christian means. And if this were not so, then Christians would not have a Social Gospel – our churches would not care for the hungry, the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the homeless. We would be insufferably selfish and narrow – walled up in our own little private worries about sin and salvation – self-assured that merely believing was enough.

So what does this have to do with Reformation Sunday? Since at least the 14th century, the Roman Catholic Church had been a target for attacks because of its hierarchy and its legalistic structure. The Papacy was a magnet for criticism especially from monarchies and principalities that challenged Papal authority over their lands and national churches. There was considerable discontent over the Papacy’s worldliness and the increasing financial burdens that it imposed on the faithful. Increasingly the Papacy was seen as an Italian foreign power of domination. A major issue at the time was the sale of indulgences: pay enough money and your soul could be absolved from punishment for your sins.

Final straw: 1516-1517 the Vatican sent to Germany a papal commissioner for the sale of indulgences to raise money to rebuild St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Martin Luther wrote to the Archbishop of Mainz challenging the use and sale of indulgences. Luther’s 95 Theses called for an open debate on indulgences – the Theses that Luther posted on the church door. You cannot buy your way out of sin – that is a false act, a false deed, a false doctrine. Only faith matters. Righteousness comes through faith alone. Luther criticized the established Church. He attracted many followers and support from the German princes and monarchs elsewhere. Three years later he was excommunicated.

Meanwhile, across the Channel in England, Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in the 1530s – another step to reduce papal influence. He gradually distanced himself from Rome and denounced papal authority. He too was excommunicated. His Archbishop, Thomas Cranmer, went to Germany around 1530, associated closely with Lutheran Reformers there, and eventually married one of their daughters. Cranmer, you remember, discarded Latin and wrote the Church of England’s first prayer book in English in 1549. (That’s an easy date to remember – it’s exactly 300 years before the founding of Northport.) What had been a national church under the control of Rome – the Church *in* England – became the Church *of* England under royal authority. It was not a new church, but a thoroughly reformed church, neither Roman nor Puritan.

So today, on Reformation Sunday, we remember not only the specific act of Martin Luther on October 31 – the act that led to the founding of a denomination inspired by his theology – we also are indebted to those in other lands who were part of the effort to reform the Church: those who were martyred for their beliefs – those who were pro-testants in the best sense of the term. We also carry in our hearts those who, today, struggle to reform religious practice that is narrow, hurtful, and exclusionary – practices and doctrines that would deny that each of us is a beloved child of God.

We need to continue to write in the margins, so we can remember our history, so we can remember who we are. ❀