

It's Still about Jesus

John 8:31-36

Reformation Sunday – Oct 29, 2017

It was on October 31, 1517, 500 years ago from this coming Tuesday, that Martin Luther awakened out of his sleep that morning. He got out of bed. Then he walked from one end of the city of Wittenberg to the other. It was a little walk, really, that would not have taken Dr. Luther more than 10 minutes to make! When he arrived there—he “nailed” his “Ninety-Five Theses” on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg!

No one, of course, recognized the great significance of that event initially, especially since Dr. Luther (with his Doctor's Degree in Theology) had honored a well-established tradition in the world of ACADEMIA at that time! He did so by writing his 95 Theses in Latin. But when someone got the bright idea of translating Luther's 95 Theses into German; the language of the common people, in addition to the fact—that Johannes Gutenberg had invented his “Printing Press” some 50 years before this; then these 95 Theses spread like wildfire throughout Europe!

Why did Luther's 95 Theses circulate so rapidly? BECAUSE THEY STRUCK A NERVE; THAT'S WHY! Unfortunately, the Church in Luther's day—had been indoctrinating the laity for some time with the false teaching that when you died, that—you didn't go immediately to heaven—to be with Christ—and with all of the other faithfully-departed people of God who had died throughout the ages before you! Instead the Medieval Church taught that when you died you first went to this horrific place called “purgatory.” There you would stay, while you were being “purged” for your temporal sins! Who knows? You may have remained there 1000 years or more before you would be welcomed into heaven! In Luther's day, the Church was teaching Christians that Christ died for the eternal punishment of sin—but not for the temporal punishment of our sins; another teaching, of course that Martin Luther could find nowhere in the Bible! These 95 Theses, however, did much to advance Luther's claim that there were a number of abusive practices be tolerated in the Church of his day!

(1) INDULGENCES: First and foremost, Luther was horrified upon his realization that the Church had succumbed to selling something called “Indulgence!” Surely—Luther thought to himself—that the pope knew nothing about this and that when it was reported to him that surely the Holy Father would CANCEL THAT WHOLE PRACTICE altogether! But Luther was wrong!

By purchasing, with money, one of these indulgences—either for yourself—or for a loved one who had already died—the sellers of these indulgences—were teaching people that they could greatly shorten their own time, or the time that their loved—who had already died in purgatory! The purchase of an INDULGENCE meant that those for whom they purchased went immediately into heaven!

The Church's chief representative who was selling “Indulgences” in Luther's neck of the woods, across the Elbe River from Wittenberg, was a man named “John Tetzel.” Someone said he was the master fund raiser when it came to raising monies for the church back then. He even called out to people in German: Wenn die Muenze im Kastlein lingt, die Selle in den Himmel springt. This phrase has been translated: “When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!” Why was the Church selling these indulgences? Because the pope needed money to pay for the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome that was under construction in those days and still is the largest church structure to be found anywhere in the world today!

Do you remember that popular country music song that was recorded and released by the country music artist Barbara Mandrell back in 1981? The title of the song was: “I Was Country, When Country Wasn't Cool.” Well, let me tell you this, my friends: “St Peter's was a megachurch when being a megachurch wasn't cool!”

Besides needing money for the building of St. Peter's Church, the pope had also hired the extremely talented Italian artist and sculptor, a man named Michelangelo, who was lying on his back on some very high scaffolding—not only week after week—or month after month—but actually—a total of 4 years to paint those gorgeous frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—all of which was very expensive too!

(2) HOLY RELICS: There was something else that really got underneath Martin Luther's skin too and this was the supposedly great collection of all of the HOLY RELICS that the Church had acquired throughout the years. The Church claimed to have the very head of John the Baptist, on location in Rome.

The Church claimed to have many various pieces of the wood from the actual cross upon which our Savior died: Some the size of splinters and some the size of pencil. Listen to this direct quote from Martin Luther himself: "Certain men have impudently boasted that they possess an actual feather from the Holy Angel—St Michael, while the Bishop of Mainz claims to have an actual flame still burning that had originally appeared in the burning bush at the time God called Moses to be a prophet! In the city of Compostella there is also a banner on display that Christ supposedly had waved as a in the devil's face during that short time of his descent into hell—not to suffer—but to proclaim victory in the enemy's camp!" Luther said that the Church claimed to have some of the actual thorns that were part of the crown of thorns placed on Jesus' head at the time of his crucifixion. But the most outrageous claim, perhaps, is that the Church claimed to have in her possession breast milk from the blessed Virgin's Mary breast that sustained our Lord during his infancy (LUTHER'S WORKS, VOLUME 54, page 247)!

What upset Martin Luther the most—is that NONE of these church practices had anything—at all—whatsoever—to do with the GOSPEL!

The whole Reformation, therefore, was about repentance: God's call to every one of us through the Gospel to confess our sins unto him! Why? To make us simply feel guilty and ashamed of ourselves? Why no, that isn't the reason at all! We confess our sins that Church can then do for us what Jesus promised his disciples, on that first Easter evening, they would soon be doing: Announcing to other people the forgiveness of their sins! John tells us... "Jesus breathed on them...."

The Reformation, if it is about anything, is about repentance! As a matter of fact this emphasis was Luther's chief contention in the first of his 95 Theses that reads: "When our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said, 'Repent ye!' he meant that the whole life of the believer should be summed up with the word "repentance!"

Why the entire life of the believer? Because we never stop sinning! The Reformation is nothing if it is not about the preaching of repentance! When John the Baptist showed up on the banks of the Jordan River, what were the first words out of his mouth? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" One chapter later in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 4, Jesus shows up! And what are the very first words out of Jesus' mouth as he begins his public ministry? "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

Several years ago, the LUTHERAN CHURCH-MISSOURI SYNOD voted in convention to entitle our celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation: "IT IS STILL ABOUT JESUS!" And isn't this a great title for our celebration in light of the words that Jesus shares with us in our Gospel lesson today?

IT IS FIRST OF ALL ABOUT JESUS BECAUSE OF HIS WORD THAT CHRIST STILL GIVES TO US. Jesus promised his first disciples that when after he had been crucified and raised from the dead, that at some later time, which turned out to be 50 days after Easter, he would then pour out the gift of the Holy Spirit upon them! The Holy Spirit would empower these disciples to faithfully recall of Christ's teachings and would even empower them near the end of their lives to write down the four Gospels at the beginning of the New Testament. Matthew and John were both a part of Jesus original twelve disciples. Mark is believed to have been St. Peter's scribe and Luke, a Gentile, was a close friend of the Apostle Paul.

The Church can only remain faithful to Christ when we "believe, teach and confess" as the Lutheran Confessions remind us—that the Holy Bible is the inspired Word of God; and as Paul also says, that the Bible is: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man or woman of God may be thoroughly equipped and ready to do every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). There is always the danger however, that the Word of God that Jesus gave to us and has preserved for us in the pages of the New Testament, can unfortunately and detrimentally be shoved to the back burner of the Church's life and in our own lives too! This is most unfortunately, what happened to the Medieval Church, over time, in Martin Luther's own day! It happened because the cross of Jesus Christ eventually lost its central place as the chief focus of the Church's life! This was something that happened gradually.

I remember reading years ago about a rather strange discovery that some biologist had made years ago in his laboratory. Somehow this biologist discovered that if you take a frog and toss him into a pan of HOT WATER that the frog will immediately jump out of that pan as fast as he can. There's no surprise here! Conversely, however, if you gently place a frog in a pan of rather cool water on a stove top and then turn the burner on low heat—so that the water heats up very slowly and only gradually—that the frog—will simply remain in that water until he dies because of the intensity of heat in that pan!

OUR CELEBRATION OF THE REFORMATION IS STILL ABOUT JESUS, BECAUSE HE STILL CALLS OUT TO US TO BECOME HIS LIFELONG DISCIPLES IN THIS WORLD.

Just because some people become disciples of Jesus Christ, at some point in their lives, by the grace of God, this does not necessarily mean that they will remain Jesus' disciples throughout their whole lives. Certainly we can see this great spiritual truth REVEALED to us just two chapters earlier in John's Gospel, in chapter 6. There we read in verse 66: "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve: 'Do you want to go away as well?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God!'"

What is a disciple? A disciple is many things from the New Testament's perspective! Certainly a disciple is a person who is willing to openly testify to his belief that Jesus is the Promised Savior of the world. The word "disciple" is a very important word occurring 260 times in the New Testament!

- (1) A true disciple is willing to undergo persecution for their faith in need be. Jesus said: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, (meaning the Prince of Demons), how much more will they malign those of his own household" (Matthew 10:24-25)!
- (2) A disciple is a person who is willing to deny themselves and their own agenda, by taking up their cross and following Jesus, no matter in whichever way it is that he leads us (Luke 14:26-27)! Cross-being involves any task that we may assume to make the love of Christ a present reality in the lives of other people throughout the world.
- (3) A disciple, according to Jesus—is a person who will be personally rewarded with a number of meaning, satisfying relationships with other disciples. Jesus says: "There is no one who leaves their house, or their brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the Gospel who will not receive a hundredfold—now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands—with persecution, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29-31)!
- (4) To be a disciple is to remain a student of the Bible all the days of your life.

OUR CELEBRATION OF THE REFORMATION TODAY IS STILL ABOUT JESUS BECAUSE OF THE DIVINE TRUTH HE IMPARTS TO US.

Five hundred years ago, spiritual truth was not questioned much. Whatever the church said, people believed, and with good reason that that was the truth! Back then, the Bible was written in Latin and Europeans no longer spoke Latin. Only monks and priests knew Latin. Thus, whatever they said about the Bible must have been the truth. Besides, if you did happen to speak up and speak out against the church, you would probably be burned at the stake.

Martin Luther was one who in his earliest years of life was conformed to the accepted truth of his time. Though his father had always dreamed of young Martin becoming a lawyer, he was one day caught in terrible storm in the forest on his walk home from graduate school—from law school! There was thunder and lightning everywhere! He was so frightened that he called out to St. Anne the Patron Saint of Safety promising: "St Anne save me and I will become a monk! Someone once responded to those words of Martin Luther by saying: "She did and he did!" St Anne saved him and Luther did become a monk! Luther knew that God says, "Be holy, because I the Lord your God, am holy!" He also knew that the Bible says: "The wages of sin is death" (Roman 6:23)! This terrified Martin Luther. If God is holy, and therefore expects us to be holy, and if the cost of sinning and not being holy is death and hell, then he was in big trouble!

OUR CELEBRATION OF THE REFORMATION TODAY IS STILL ABOUT JESUS BECAUSE OF THE FREEDOM HE BRINGS TO US! "IF THE SON SETS YOU FREE YOU WILL BE FREE INDEED!"

Jesus says: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!"

For a long time...Martin Luther when he was growing up and all even until he was about the age of being 25 years old...felt a great sense of torment and anguish in his soul!

But by the grace of God, when Luther was studying Paul's letter to the Romans he came across verses like these: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written: "The righteous shall live by faith!"

In chapter 3 he read, “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith” (Romans 3:21-25)!

Luther came to realize, by the powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit one day, at work in his life, through Luther’s study of the Scriptures—that he could only be freed by the Son of God!

Luther found this truth greatly expounded for him in Paul’s word to the Ephesians especially: “For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast!”

How about the gift of wine? Luther was well-acquainted with those words found in Psalm 104:15, where the psalmist praises the Lord God saying: “You give wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man’s heart!” And Solomon’s words in Ecclesiastes 9:7 “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do!

But Luther was also well acquainted with Proverbs 23:29-35 that vividly paints the life of an alcoholic. Such people, the Bible says, have woe, sorrow, strife and are always hurting themselves. In their drunkenness their eyes see strange things and their heart think perverse thoughts!

Luther was very well-acquainted with St. Paul’s words in Ephesians 5:18, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit!”

Yes it is a well-known fact that Martin Luther loved to drink beer, but often encouraged people to do so with moderation. But Luther wasn’t the only reformer who enjoyed beer. John Calvin; a French reformer living in Geneva, who was 26 years younger than Luther, had a number of meetings with Martin Luther—he loved to drink beer too. He said that whenever he would go to a new town or city he had not visited before, he looked forward to tasting some of their brew because there are many different types of beer; each with their own distinct taste.

In 2003 a man named Jim West wrote a book entitled: DRINKING WITH CALVIN AND LUTHER. In this book Jim West writes: “Luther made sure his stein was full before he prepared sermons and lectures. Luther viewed the reformation of the Church as both a process and a promise that was totally accomplished by God. He used to say that God reformed the church, while he, drank Wittenberg beer!”

Martin Luther also said: “Whoever drinks beer falls to sleep quickly and whoever sleeps long, does not sin! Whoever does not sin, enters Heaven! Thus, let us drink beer!”

Luther had quite a sense of humor too. “Before I was married,” Martin Luther recalled, “the bed was not made for a whole year and became foul with sweat. But I worked so hard and was so weary I tumbled in without noticing it.” However, when Martin married the runaway nun Katherine Von Bora, whom Luther called Katie, the bed was made, the sheets were changed, and the house was kept clean! Marriage also,” Luther said, “requires sacrifice, looking out not only for the needs of yourself but also for your wife and family.

“There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage,” Luther continued, “especially when one wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pigtailed on the pillow!”

Luther, of course, was a former monk and Katie was a former nun. She was at the Nimbschen Convent and she was there with some other nuns who were actually rescued by a friend of Luther’s who was a fish merchant. His name was Leonard Kopp and he ended up at the monastery with barrels of herring to drop off. It was late in the evening, and the nuns who wanted to escape got into those herring barrels on his cart, and in the morning he went right out the gate with them. He brought them to Wittenberg and Luther found husbands for many of them. But Luther had a hard time finding a husband who would please one of them. This was Katharina von Bora; she had her eyes on Martin.

Martin wasn’t all that interested in getting married at the time. He was an outlaw; he had a death sentence on him for the rest of his life. While he could live with that, he didn’t want to put that burden on a wife and possible children. But he relented.

Luther said he married Katie for three reasons.

The first was to make the pope angry.

The second was to show that he believed in his theology. Luther was preaching against a celibate clergy as early as 1518 and 1519. And so, he wanted to show that he believed in his theology.

And the third reason to get married, Luther said, was that he owed his parents grandchildren.

As they continued in their married life, however, Luther later said that there was really only one singular reason for which he married and that was his deep love for Katie; Katie, whom Luther called jokingly called his "rib" thinking back to the creation story in Genesis, how Eve was made out of one of Adam's ribs.

What we see when we look at this relationship is that Luther honored Katie. She was a very busy woman, and much of what kept her busy was running their household. God blessed Martin and Katie with six children: Hans; Elizabeth, who died at eight months old; Magdalena, who died at twelve years old; Paul; and Margarete.

In addition, they had goats, chickens, pigs, and a dog. If that wasn't enough, they also had a brewhouse, which Katie ran, along with a fish hatchery and a large garden. Katie was a very busy woman who not only had all of those things going on but was also married to the great Dr. Martin Luther, and so she entertained the many people who came to stay with them and to learn more about the Bible from Martin.

At one point, Luther said, "I shall die as one who loves and lauds marriage." Before Luther, marriage was not highly regarded. The priests and nuns, of course, were not to be married, and there was a sense in which marriage was looked down upon. Luther, through his marriage and his teaching, helped to redeem marriage. And so, indeed, he died as one who both loved marriage and lauded marriage, and he loved his wife, Katie. AMEN