

29 October 2017

Here I Stand
Reformation Sunday, 2017
Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians 2:8-9

(Enter Martin Luther) Five hundred years – on Tuesday, five hundred years to the day. That’s when I posted those theses, having no intention of doing anything more than prompting a civil theological discussion, toward ending the practice of indulgences. I meant no more than that at the time.

But I go too fast. I should tell how it all came to be. My name is Martin Luther, and even here in the New World, some of you may have heard the name. I was born to Hans and Margarethe Luther in 1483, in Saxony. My father was a successful man and intended me to be a lawyer. I should be grateful for that, because toward that end he sent me to all the best schools – Bah! Schools indeed! Silly halls of rote memorization! If I there were a Purgatory – and there is not! – it would be like that. I did manage to learn some Latin and Greek, but law? I was always drawn more to philosophy and theology. Then one day, riding back from school in a thunderstorm – I said I was educated, not smart – lightning struck a tree beside me and I cried out, “God, don’t kill me! I’ll become a monk!” Well, and there we were.

I became a monk with a will and vengeance. I took to monking like a pig to mud, living out a boy’s fantasy of piety. Oh, yes, I was pious – in the worst possible way. I had a notebook, in which I wrote down my every sin, my every unclean thought, so as to be sure not to miss any in confession. I confessed more frequently, and more thoroughly, than any three of my fellow monks. They could have assigned one confessor just to me, if they could have found someone who wanted the job. I was a nuisance. But you must understand: I was terrified for my eternal soul. What if the lightning struck again, and I had a mortal sin lying about unconfessed? So I did everything I could to gain God’s favor. I even went on a pilgrimage to Rome. And there I did, in fact, receive a word from God. As I crawled up the great stone steps of the cathedral there, along with the other pilgrims, it was as if a voice from heaven spoke to me. It said, “Isn’t this a little bit stupid? Do you really believe God will favor you more for banging your knees on some stone steps? Is God so petty?”

I returned to Germany and there became a professor of theology, still a monk, of course, but no longer in the cloister. I taught the writings of the great theologians, and of course I taught scripture, which meant I had to read it. I read this, from the Apostle Paul, for instance:

²¹ But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)

That was from Romans 3, of course. But there was also Ephesians.

⁸*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—*⁹*not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

And there was more in Romans, and Galatians. Everywhere I looked, the story was the same: God's salvation was given us out of God's love, expressed through grace. We did not earn God's love – Bah! Of what value is a love that requires conditions to be met? We could not gain salvation by our own efforts at piety. All we could do was accept the love that was offered us. That love is called “grace,” and our acceptance we call “faith.” The whole New Testament declared the same holy doctrine, that we are saved by grace, not by works. Read some more:

¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)*

(*To liturgist*) What are you doing? Did I ask you to read from James? Did I? I've *never* asked anyone to read from James! I don't even know why it's in the Bible! Fine, I will admit that this epistle of straw, this James, says that works are important, too, but let's stay focused here! The point is that we are *saved* by faith, not by doing good deeds or going on pilgrimages or maintaining lists of sins for confession. Salvation is bigger than that. God is bigger than that.

And God is much bigger than indulgences. Just as I was coming to understand the New Testament's doctrine of Grace Alone, an even worse heresy arose. Pope Leo was raising money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome – Bah! The Pope. The richest man in Europe! But would he spend his own money? No, he sold indulgences: worthless slips of paper, promising that for a price, the pope would use his supposed power over heaven and hell to give the bearer a pass out of Purgatory. Marketing salvation like fish!

Finally, I'm back where I began. On October 31, 1517, I posted Ninety-Five theses: points of disagreement with the abuse of the doctrine of salvation by the practice of indulgences. I sent a copy to the pope, and I posted a copy on the doors of Wittenburg Cathedral. Suggestions for discussion. That's all they were. Perhaps some were a bit forceful. At any rate, the theses were not taken well by the pope and the bishops. But with a new invention – you have the printing press in the New World, yes? – my theses were all over Europe within months.

The pope's pet theologians declared my questions to be heresy, of course. They could hardly say anything else. It was the pope who paid for their fur robes. Or, rather, the peasants of Germany did. Pope Leo even sent them to dispute with me. Perhaps they thought a rustic German monk with no friends would be easy to intimidate. I was *not* easy to intimidate. And to my surprise, I discovered that I did have friends. Elector Friedrich, the prince of Saxony, made himself my friend, and when the pope's inquisitors arrived, Friedrich gave me his own guard to ensure my safe conduct to the trial. There Master Johann Eck showed me my own writings, declared that they stood against Church Doctrine and demanded to know if I stood by them. It was clear that to say yes would separate me from the only church I had known, the only one that existed.

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.

The rest of the story you probably know. The pope sent a letter excommunicating me. I burned it. Friedrich hid me in Wartburg Castle from my enemies and their assassins, and while I was there I translated the New Testament from Greek into German. If the Church could not be trusted with the Word of God, then it should be given to all people. A reformation of the Church had begun.

No birth is free from pains. There were wars. There were excesses. Some took the work I began and went further. Without my work there would have been no Johann Calvin. What can I say? I'm sorry. But you don't need to worry about that. You're all good Lutherans, right?

What? Methodists? You mean Johann Wesley? Oh, no! What are you thinking? A good man, I'm sure, but his theology! I've read his writings. He *says* he believes in salvation by grace alone, but then he goes on to talk about all the things you're supposed to do next. He's as bad as the Book of James! Once you are saved, he says, you must go on and live a life of prayer and fasting and frequent Communion and "Holy Conferencing" – I swear, that's what he calls it! Holy Conferencing! I've been to one of your Methodist conferences! Holy something-else, more like! And then Wesley calls all these good works "Means of Grace"! Means of Grace! What does that even mean? There are no *means* of grace! Grace is given freely, or it isn't grace! The only good thing I know about your Johann Wesley is that his conversion experience at Aldersgate came when he was in a group reading a commentary on Romans by . . . me. One moment of good theological taste, and then thththbtt!

But even if your Wesley was wrong, or if I am, being right is not what matters. We are not saved by having the right opinions any more than we are saved by banging our knees on the stone steps at Rome. We are saved because God has chosen to save us, has chosen to be gracious. It is all I have ever taught. All I ever shall. Here I stand. I can do no other. Amen.

* * *

Final word: Martin Luther was no paragon. He was a coarse, stubborn man. Yes, he had a brilliant mind, but so did many others. It was his bull-headedness that made him so formidable. He did not always manage human relationships well, and he had a fondness both for beer and gutter humor. And yet he had one rare attribute: when he read scripture, he didn't just read *it*, he let it read him. When he turned to the Bible it was not in order to find there words he could use to defend what he already believed, but to find out what he was to believe. He did not shape the words of scripture to fit his needs; instead he allowed the words to shape him. And any man or woman who can do that will be changed.

And may even change the world. Five hundred years ago this week, this obstinate German did that, and today we give thanks. Amen.