

---

The Reformation: 500 years and counting  
Martin Grove United Church  
October 29, 2017  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 3:19-28 and John 8:31-36

There is an old “joke” that says, “Jesus promised us the kingdom, but all he left us with was the Church”. It’s a joke for many reasons. For one thing, Jesus never left the Jewish faith, he never became Christian, and he never founded the church. That task was taken on by Jesus’s followers, initially the disciples, and St. Paul. The other reason it’s a joke is because of the idea that there is only one church, when we see so many different churches these days. I keep saying that there are 12 churches within 1 km of here, and nobody has corrected me yet. If Jesus left us with “the church”, we should be excused for asking, “which one exactly?”

Today, I expect most of us have a lot of tolerance for other churches. Perhaps we don’t want to join them, but we can respect the idea that different churches carry different traditions, and it’s good that people have choices. But if we go back in time - say about 500 years - we would find a lot less tolerance for other churches. In fact, if we go back exactly 500 years, in Europe there was really only one church. Yes, there were other churches based on the Christian faith, but they were mainly in the Levant Region and in Africa, and in Asia. For Europeans, there was only one church - the Roman Catholic Church.

That single church originated partly because of a statement that Jesus is said to have made in Matthew 16:18. If we start at verse 15 we get, “Jesus said to the disciples, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” This statement led to the belief that Jesus was founding the church on Peter. And Peter is said to have been the first Bishop of Jerusalem. And Peter started a lineage of Bishops that leads to the Roman Catholic Pope today. That’s the main reason that the

---

Roman Catholic Church believes it is the one true Church. Who can argue with that?

Well, lots of people can argue with that.

[SLIDE - petros vs petra]

500 years ago, many people were very superstitious, and lived lives that were brutish and short. So naturally, people had a deep interest in salvation and the afterlife. The church of course had all the answers for people concerning salvation and the afterlife. The church had over 1000 years of tradition to fall back on, and if that wasn't enough, they also had a Pope who could declare what the truth was. It was a system that worked for many people. But the system didn't work for everybody. One person it didn't work for was a German Monk, Priest, and Theologian named Martin Luther. Luther was a dedicated Christian Priest, but he was plagued by his own doubts about his own salvation. Seeking a better understanding of his own salvation, he looked to the Bible to add to what he already knew as a Priest. And he found things in the Bible he could not reconcile with what the church was teaching. The short story is that Luther stated his objections to the church, was de-monked, and went on to start his own church. But that version of the story is so short it's almost silly.

Let's backtrack and consider what problem the church was solving for people. People wanted to find salvation. And the church told them how to get just that. On that level, the system worked just fine. The Roman Catholic solution involved confessing your sins to a priest, taking mass, and visiting sacred relics and places - collectively what the church called "works". If you did these works, then after you died you would go to heaven. That sounds simple enough. But only saintly people would do that. [SLIDE - purgatory] Most people, when they died, would go to "purgatory", a place where their evil nature would be burned away, to make them "good enough" to go to heaven. Purgatory was not a fun place - it was like hell, except that you got out eventually. Eventually was the word. The church had lists of sins and connected to each sin was the amount of time it would get you in purgatory - it was like prison really. According to one source, a "normal" person might expect to spend 10,000-20,000 years in purgatory before they graduated to heaven.

But the church had a solution for that too. There were enough saints who had

---

died that there was a surplus of God's grace, and the church (the Pope actually) had the power to dispense this grace to ease people through purgatory faster. And how did one get the Pope to dispense some of this grace to help you (or perhaps one of your dead relatives) get through purgatory faster? Simple. You bought what was called an "indulgence". [SLIDE - indulgence 1 and indulgence 2] It was the ultimate "get out of jail free" card. Except that it was get out of jail for a fee. Martin Luther had a big problem with that because almost none of what I have just said in the last couple of minutes is in the Bible.

But you might be surprised to learn what Luther's big concern was, because it's not what we might expect. *Later on* in the conflict that came to be known as the "Protestant Reformation", Luther objected to the idea that people had to pay money to the church to buy indulgences. Clearly, indulgences put wealthy people at an advantage over common people. At one point, Luther challenged the Pope - saying that if the Pope really had the power and authority to get people out of purgatory, then based solely on the Christian virtue of mercy, the Pope should release all people from purgatory immediately, without even being asked, and certainly without waiting to receive money.

Usually when we tell the story of the Protestant Reformation, we stop right here, we say that the Pope was evil, and we congratulate ourselves for being Protestant - or more accurately we congratulate ourselves for NOT being catholic, and we go for coffee. Sorry. It's not coffee time yet. Because there is more to the story, and in fact, I would argue that the Protest Reformation that we claim happened about 500 years ago is actually an ongoing process we participate in every day - or not - right here.

Interestingly, Luther's initial objection to indulgences was actually pastoral. Luther - who was a practicing priest remember - would sometimes run into people on the street, and would sometimes (in a loving way I'm sure) point out that Luther had not seen them in the confessional box recently. And Luther was increasingly meeting people who told him - basically - that they had bought a nice indulgence so had decided they didn't feel any need to confess any more. Luther met more and more people who thought the "get out of jail free" card meant they could now ignore the church but even worse than that, felt that they could actually ignore their own faith. Wealthy people in particular,

---

could purchase their future freedom from purgatory, and feel immune to consequences from any future sins. The “get out of jail free” card was being used as a licence to sin. Luther brought this up with his superiors - initially - because he was worried about the salvation of his people if they gave up their faith and were not concerned about their future sins at all. To Luther, the point of faith was not only to go to heaven. The point of faith was to live a life of faith, and indulgences were skewing that whole idea.

But yes, at some point, Luther saw enough issues in the church that he posted a document we call the “95 theses”. He nailed these 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. [SLIDE - nailing] We like to pretend that this was a very democratic move, but Luther posted the theses in Latin, so that priests and other educated people could debate them. The 95 theses were not for public consumption. This action of nailing the theses to the door of the church is what we commemorate today. (Which is why I put a similar notice on our door this morning) That event (if it happened at all, it may be mythical) was 500 years ago this coming Tuesday. The story - and the action itself - are symbolic of the entire Reformation, even though the Reformation was the work of many people in many countries, over many years. Luther is the lightning rod for the Reformation. “He nailed it!”

[SLIDES and props]

We celebrate today because it’s the anniversary of Luther nailing the 95 theses to the door of the church. But it took more than that to ignite the storm that became the Reformation. There are many factors of course, but I want to name two of them.

For one thing, Luther re-activated the long-standing debate about salvation. The BIG question. Which is this - are we saved by works, or by faith? Today we might add two more options, like both, and neither. But 500 years ago, the debate was works vs faith. This debate has existed ever since St. Paul took pen to parchment, because St. Paul only named the issue himself, as we read this morning from Romans. I’m sure we are all familiar with the issue, because we feel it today. Whatever you imagine the word “salvation” means, do we achieve it through faith? Or through works? If we argue that we are saved by faith alone, someone will say, “sure, but if you are a faithful person, doesn’t that automatically lead you to do good works?” And if we argue that we are

---

saved by works alone, someone will say, “what good are your works if you don’t even know why you are doing them?” Luther came down with the conclusion that we are saved by our faith in God. Period. But also, that faith is not just a thoughtless emotional response. Luther (who was tortured by his own doubts remember) thought that “faith” was not just having a sticker on your forehead that said “Christian”. Faith was the result of grappling with your own nature, the nature of God, and seeing your place in the kingdom of God - which might involve you doing works!

In other words, Luther believed that we are saved by faith, but a thoughtful faith, and one that led to action too. And let’s not gloss over this idea of “thoughtful faith” too quickly. 500 years ago, the church told you what to believe. Thought was not required! People before Luther had been burned at the stake for thinking in church. Thinking was considered very dangerous. [SLIDE - no thinking]

And this is perhaps what really got Luther de-monked. Luther translated into German the New Testament, and later the entire Bible, so that common people could read the Bible, use their God-given brains, and think for themselves about their own faith. The Reformers took full advantage of a new technology called the “printing press” and spread their idea and the scripture - in German - so that normal people could participate in reading and in thinking about their own faith. This act elevated the Word (Scripture) over works, which is why this pulpit is elevated, as a symbol that thoughtful reflection on scripture (which is what sermons are, right) are spoken from an elevated platform. [SLIDE - pulpit]

And it’s why I can stand here today and tell you that the Reformation is not about our past. The Reformation can only be about our present. And if you want to celebrate your Protestant roots, go home, read your Bible, and think about your faith. Yes, you have every right to also expect a scripture-based, thoughtful sermon here once a week. But you are responsible for your own faith. And no, I don’t have any of those “get out of jail cards to hand out anyway”.

Celebrate the reformation celebrate your own faith.

*Amen.*