

“Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda”

October 29, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
Reformation Sunday, the Thirtieth in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Text: *“Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.*

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!”

(Psalm 90:16-17, NRSV)

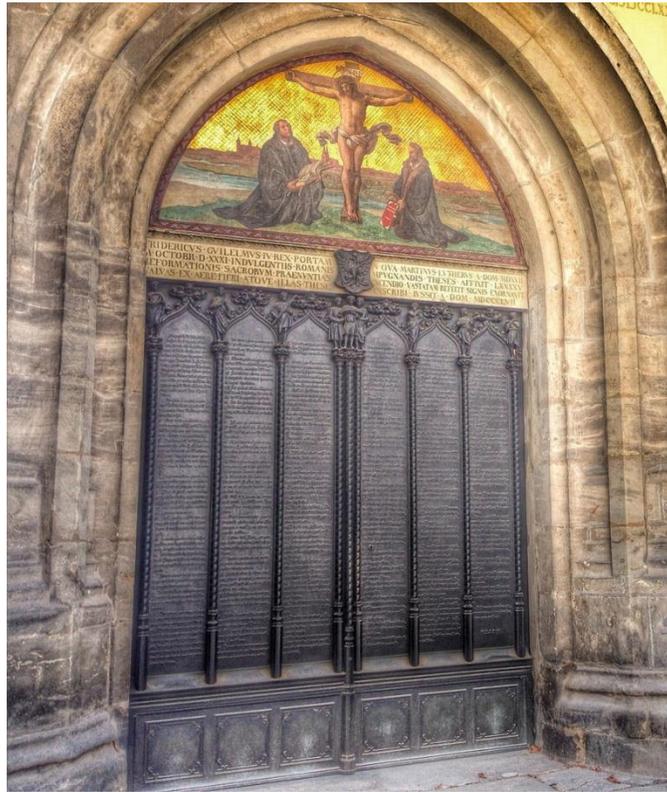


Image Credit: *The door at the castle church of Wittenberg, Germany – All Saints' Church— where Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on October 31st, 1517. The bronzed doors were installed in the mid 1800's.*

The picture that heads this sermon and that graces the cover of the bulletin is the famous door on the Cathedral Church at Wittenberg, Germany -- All Saints' Church -- where 500 years ago on October 31st (this Tuesday just passed) Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses to this door; a large paper "broadside", in Latin, challenging the Roman Church's practice of granting indulgences for sins, among other complaints and criticisms. Luther served that church as an Augustinian monk and priest.

The doors you see in the picture are made of bronze and were installed in the 1850s. They are replacements for the original wooden doors in Luther's time. Each column on the doors is embossed with the original 95 Theses as a commemoration of Luther's act. Above the door is a picture -- called a tympanum -- depicting Jesus on the cross flanked on either side by Luther kneeling to his right, holding his German translation of the Bible, and Philipp Melanchthon, Luther's associate, kneeling to Christ's left, holding in his hands the Augsburg Confession of 1530; one of the founding documents of the Lutheran Church in Germany.

Luther was a tank of a man; a bull in a china shop! Though he was born of peasant stock, he became a popular academic and professor at the University of Wittenberg. He regularly went after the ruling powers with biting wit and sarcasm. He once said to one of his opponents: *"For you are an excellent person; as skillful, clever and versed in Holy Scripture as a cow in a walnut tree or a sow on a harp."*ⁱ

He loved a good time and let other people know it; he laughed often, and often laughed at himself. In speaking about an upcoming message, he said, *"Tomorrow I have to lecture on the drunkenness of Noah (Genesis 9:20-27). So I should drink enough this evening to be able to talk about that wickedness as one who knows by experience."*ⁱⁱ

In Luther's time, there was a whole industry based on holy relics, sacred artifacts that were imbued with the holiness of the person whose finger it had been, or whose skull it was . . . In Rome, the faithful could pray at a display of the skull of John the Baptist (he had been beheadedⁱⁱⁱ) taking years off of their time in the purgatory to come. It was quite an industry often involving money. Luther often made fun of these relics and those who collected them, especially those belonging to the Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz (the first recipient of the 95 Theses in letter form). Luther created a pamphlet that he circulated anonymously among the archbishop's parishes that heralded,

"A New Pamphlet from the Rhine', excitedly announcing an additional exhibit filled with newly discovered relics so special that a special indulgence was being offered by the Pope! Included in this fantastic new collection: three flames from the burning bush on Mount Sinai [Exod. 3:3], . . . two feathers and an egg from the Holy Spirit (NB: the Holy Spirit was often depicted as a dove in the Renaissance Church), a whole pound of the wind that roared by Elijah in the cave on Mount Horeb [1 Kings 19:11]; five nice strings from the harp of David . . ."^{iv}

Pointing out the absurdity of what was going on. It was said of Luther, *"His wit relaxed anxious minds and annoyed angry foes . . ."*^v Hmm.

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Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

Today I want to honor Martin Luther and then to point to that which animated Martin Luther.

Martin Luther was a man I would have loved to have been in his company for any number of reasons.

This picture below is of a statue of Martin Luther in Wittenberg^{vi}; it shows him with the Scriptures . . .

The Scriptures were very important to him. It is living Word.



Martin Luther believed that the truth was gained through knowing the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the WORD. It says in the gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word -- the Greek word "logos". The Greeks said of that word, for "Word", that it was "reason", or "rationality,"

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."^{vii} For Luther, the person of Jesus as the Word, in his flesh made real, made manifest in his earthly ministry, death, and resurrection were the first means of discovering truth.

The second means of discovering the truth was in the written Word; the Word read. So, he went about translating the Scriptures from Greek and Hebrew into vernacular German. Can you imagine going to church for worship and always it is in a language that you do not know, cannot speak, and only occasionally understand a phrase of it here, or an action there in the repetition of certain things -- *"This is the part where we kneel" . . . "This is the part where we should stand up because it sounds like hat was said last week . . ."* But otherwise, you are not really comprehending anything. What would happen, if in walking into church one Sunday, the priest was talking like you in your words, in your language? What would that do for you? Martin Luther used to go down into the markets and simply hang out listening, picking up words people were using in their everyday, unguarded moments; and then he went about translating the Scriptures into those words. . . That was a very, very important thing to do; to make the Scriptures accessible to everyone. I truly believe that is one of the reasons why the Protestant Reformation took off so well, so abundantly -- for the peoples were hearing in their own languages the Words of God in ways they had never heard them before! As an example, there is a passage in Hebrew that references a "chameleon", a creature unknown to Germans, so Luther derived the sense of the passage and substituted the word "weasel" instead. And that's the kind of thing he did that made the Bible he was translating so much more real. Thus the Word written became the second means of discovery of the truth.

There is the Word himself, the Lord Jesus Christ; and our relationship with him leads us to the written Word of Scripture; a Word that speaks directly to us, not filtered through someone else . . . That was the problem with the Church in Luther's day. There was just one little pipe through which all the information flowed from the priest-class to everyone else; they're the ones who knew Latin; who knew the words. Luther believed that was not enough. He believed the people needed to hear the plain truth of Scripture in their own language.

The third thing that was important for the discovery of truth to Martin Luther was that the Word be proclaimed; that the Word be spoken! Thus Luther claimed the truth unfolded from the Word himself; then found in the written Word, and then, by the spoken Word. And it was in the proclamation of the truth that the Holy Spirit is at work, making plain, making sense that leads us to a greater relationship to God and the assurance of our salvation.

That was the problem Luther wrestled with for so many years! He wanted to have that assurance deep in his soul that he was forgiven! Can you imagine? You live your life and you are always wondering, *"Am I forgiven? Am I good enough? Have I done all that I can do? How do I know God loves me?"* And Luther finally had an engagement with Scripture that made it quite clear that we do not have the ability to satisfy or fulfill those kinds of requirements -- But God loves us so much he fulfills them in the person of his Son Jesus Christ; and that by belief in Christ that is the gift of faith given to us by the Holy Spirit, so we can believe that we are saved. So Luther was able to affirm with deep assurance that salvation comes through Christ alone; and that he understood that salvation through the Word alone; He received that salvation by faith alone. He says to us in effect: *"It is not a church that tells me that, nor a Pope, nor some powers that be; I don't try to pay off God with money to say a prayer by genuflecting in order to shave off some of the debt I owe. We cannot repay that debt -- but thanks be to God it is already satisfied!"* That was the great truth that Luther realized needed to be in everybody's hands.

And so, with his hands he tacked up the big broadside paper on the door of All Saints' Church at Wittenberg that started a reformation! And he believed! He, himself, was a priest; a Roman Catholic priest; celibate; an Augustinian monk. And he had an understanding that the Church he served was in need of reformation.

*Ecclesia Reformata . . . The Church reformed; that needs to be reformed . . . And recognizing that we move from moment-to-moment; that we move from age-to-age -- *Semper* -- always --*

Reformanda -- being reformed . . . The Church reformed and always being reformed -- that was what Luther was proclaiming 500 Hundred years ago this past Tuesday! I think that is really significant! It is worthy of praise . . . But it is especially worthy of praise to God who prospers the work of our hands. As the Psalmist pleads, "*O Lord, prosper thou the work of our hands.*" And whether it is in tacking up on the door at Wittenberg a paper that sparks a reformation, or it is in a hand clasped in a hand in prayer for others; as the Lord reaches out to you and makes his way into your heart in the reality of himself -- the Word revealed -- and in your consistent reading of the written Word of Holy Scripture; and ultimately, then, hearing the Word, in being a person who gets to church to hear the Word proclaimed -- that's the legacy of Luther! It is a guidepost; it is a way for us to follow.

And ultimately, in the end, it is all about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ in your life. And so, on this 500th anniversary of the work of Luther's hands, what is the work of God in your hands, today?

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

"Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

(Martin Luther, before the Imperial Diet of Worms, April 1521)

ⁱ Martin Luther, *Against Hanswurst*, Luther's Works, Volume 41; p. 219.

ⁱⁱ Eric W. Gritsch, *The Wit of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, 2006; as highlighted in a blog post by Jane Voigts at <http://janevoigts.com/blog/2014/10/24/luther-laughter>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Mark 6:14-29.

^{iv} Gritsch via Voigts.

^v Timothy Maschke in a review of Eric Gritsch's book, *The Wit of Martin Luther*, in a blog post at <https://concordiatheology.org/2010/03/the-wit-of-martin-luther-by-eric-w-gritsch/>

^{vi} Image unattributed, but posted at <https://www.livingpassages.com/2017/03/the-95-theses-from-the-reformation/>

^{vii} John 1:1.