

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

The big day is finally here! We have been talking about the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation for at least a year, if not more. And today is finally the big celebration. The actual anniversary date is on Tuesday, October 31st but I'm fairly certain you won't be coming back for another worship service on Tuesday, so today marks the auspicious occasion, the day the Lutheran church or any Protestant church really, remembers where it all began. I'm sure in your homes you have had a countdown going for months just like you do for Christmas, right? Maybe you even decorated your home with red or covered your walls with Lutheran roses? I bet you have a big, family meal planned for later today. And I just know you were so excited you couldn't sleep last night, right? Yea, me either. So what is it exactly that we are celebrating today?

On October 31st 1517 a young monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 theses, or 95 objections to the Catholic church practices and beliefs based on scripture, to the castle door in Wittenberg. With these objections Luther hoped and prayed that the Catholic church would recognize the mistakes they were making in their practices and hierarchy and get back to the truth, the word of God.

When Luther nailed those theses to that door he had no idea what was about to happen. He didn't want to start a movement. He just wanted to be an influencer of change in an institution of the church that he loved so much and dedicated his entire life to bettering. Luther believed in his heart that if the higher ups, bishops and archbishops, would hear what was happening on the ground, in churches and on the local level of church polity, they would be appalled and make the appropriate changes. And the church would be wonderful and restored.

But that's not what happened at all. Instead Luther was reprimanded and excommunicated from the church for highlighting the discrepancies.

So what were Luther's biggest issues? The first issue that Luther had was that the Catholic church was taking Scripture and making it say whatever they wanted to, in order to best suit them. For example, the church was creating indulgences. These indulgences were for purchase. What they were, was a paper that you bought on behalf of your loved ones, either dead or alive, to help them get out of purgatory and guarantee them a space in heaven. And the money from the sale of indulgences went into the churches coffers and paid for St. Peter's Cathedral, "the golden church" to be built. Luther was firm that no place in scripture supported this practice and he despised the church taking care of already poor people and convincing them to spend their money on things that were unnecessary.

The Catholic church also taught that you could earn your way into heaven; the more work you did for the church, the more money you gave to the church and the priests, the more prayers you said, the better person you were, the more likely it would be that Jesus would allow you into heaven. Luther himself struggled with this teaching. He tried so hard to make himself worthy of God, but he felt nothing he did made him worthy enough. He used to climb up and down the stairwells in the monastery on his knees until they bled to repent for his sins. He recited wrote prayer after wrote prayer. He wore camel's hair clothing inside out and itch and itch until he couldn't stand it anymore, but he didn't feel better or redeemed afterwards.

So Luther studied and studied scripture, and studied, and studied and studied some more; until he came across the verse in Romans 1: "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." When he first studied this verse he hated it. He saw God's righteousness as God acting out against an

unworthy and unjust sinner. He thought of it as punishment; that's how the Catholic church interpreted it. You had to earn your righteousness. He saw that he wasn't worthy of faith, and that he was far from righteous. But when he read from Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast;" he had a revelation. He saw that we couldn't make up, buy, manufacture or even earn our faith, faith is a gift given by the Holy Spirit. And if that is true, then we are made righteous only by God, not by our works. Our faith, or how we live our lives, is what we do in response to that gift of faith. After this revelation Luther finally felt worthy of God's love and grace because he realized faith and righteousness have absolutely nothing to do with us, or with our works, but depends solely on the work of Jesus dying on the cross for the sake of the world. This discovery was absolutely life-changing for Luther and he wanted everyone to know about it. Many of Luther's theses were related to this theme.

After coming to this theological conclusion Luther then began to think about the average Christian and the lack of biblical knowledge they had. He objected to the way the Catholic church services, or mass, were spoken in Latin. He objected to the fact that the lay people couldn't receive both the bread and wine in communion. He spoke out against the lack of lay participation in worship, arguing that the word "liturgy" was the work of the people. He objected that they had no way to read scripture or have wrote prayer since most common people did not read or write. He objected to having to have an intercessor in prayer; he believed you could speak directly to God...and said that was the entire reason Jesus was sent to the earth, to make God tangible for all people. Luther spoke out against all these practices and he begged the church to reform. He wanted so desperately for people to be involved in their faith and to be freed by the Gospel as he had been freed.

I've often wondered why in the world this gospel lesson appears every single year for reformation. I could think of some others that I like a lot better and I think fit a lot with theme of a reforming church, but this year, in honor of the 500th anniversary I have spent some extra time reading and praying over Luther's works and I think I too had a revelation. God's work through Martin Luther revealed to the world that we are saved only by the work of Christ dying on the cross to redeem our sins. God revealed through Luther there is nothing that we can do to add to that gift or earn it ourselves. And we know that because we have been saved, and we don't have to worry about our futures, that we are freed to love and serve God and our neighbor.

But as I was reading Scripture and Luther's commentaries I realized that they both take our freedom even a step further. We are freed to become a new creation. A new creation that focuses intently on reflecting God in all our words and our deeds. A new creation that thrives on spending time in scripture, in prayer, in fellowship, in study with God's church. A new creation that is kind, caring, and empathetic. A new creation that doesn't look inward, but focuses outward, on others and the community in which we live. Through God's promises we are freed to be what God created us to be, love and light. I pray that we will go out into the world and preach the gospel, and only when necessary preach that gospel using words.

So, here's to 500 years of a changing, reforming church. 500 years of a church striving to maintain and uphold the Scriptures that God has given to us as a gift. 500 years of faithful saints who have been a witness to God's word. And here's to 500 more years of striving to follow God's plan for us, the church, and the world around us. As Luther would say, Here I stand, I can do no other. Amen.

