

The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204
704.333.5428 www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

INDULGING A NEW REFORMATION

Gospel of Mark 11:15-17; Gospel of Matthew 21:10-13 and Gospel of John 2:13-16
Reformation Sunday: Observing the 500th Anniversary of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses
Ninth Sunday in Kingdomtide, October 29, 2017
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



(This message is presented as three interwoven homilies: *From Jerusalem to Wittenberg – Centralization;*
From Wittenberg to Charlotte – De-Centralization; and *Indulging a New Reformation – Collaboration.*)

From Jerusalem to Wittenberg – Centralization

Martin Luther was like you and every other person of faith; he needed spiritual renewal.

Last Sunday evening, our youth allowed me to have some time with them. Kevin and Lee are teaching our youth about the various dimensions of worship. My role with them was to give them some information about today's message and ask for some feedback. One question they asked was: '*why does a person need spiritual renewal?*' My basic response is: '*the human spirit needs renewal for the same reason the human body needs a shower. If you didn't wash your body, you would get infections, stink and numerous other bad things would happen. In like manner, your spirit needs to be renewed to be rid of infections that make your spirit sick.*'

In the winter of 1510, a 27-year old Augustinian Monk, Martin Luther, went to Rome hoping to experience spiritual renewal. But, when he crested the hill looking down on the glistening city of Rome, he entered a dark night of the soul. He experienced spiritual inconsistencies in Rome. The centralization of hierarchical hypocrisy and corrupt expressions of institutional religion caused him to question whether the Roman Church reflected the spiritual commitment of Jesus at all.

In the time of Luther, death was a constant companion. The Roman Church taught that confession of sin cleanses from guilt, but not punishment. So, the idea of purging sin developed. After death, Christians went to purgatory to work off punishment. Martin suffered with depression and was obsessed with confessing his sin. His anxiety was driven by honest doubts that could describe young adults of any century including many millennials today. His questions included: *If there is a God, can this God be trusted? What or Who is the power behind the universe? What characteristics of God were present in Jesus and must be present in Christ's Church?* Luther's young mind was pummeled with superstitious teachings of the medieval church. He was taught that God is unapproachable, judgmental and condemning. He went to Rome searching for theological depth and spiritual sincerity. Yet, rather than authentic faith, he found the priests to be irreverent. Rather than humble service, he saw hypocrisy practicing religion as a business controlling people by entertaining them and manipulating their fears.

Martin's disillusionment reached its apex as he climbed the steps of Pilate's Palace; steps that had been moved from Jerusalem to Rome. Obedient to the teachings of Rome, he knelt on each step, prayed The Lord's Prayer and kissed where Jesus had walked. Rome taught this appeased God and released souls from purgatory. As Luther reached the top of the stairs, he said, "*Who knows if that is so?*" He later commented on his pilgrimage to Rome in 1510, "*I went to Rome with onions and returned with garlic... If there is a Hell, Rome is built upon it.*"

When Luther returned from Rome, Luther was assigned to teach in The University of Wittenberg, a village of about 2,000 residents. Between 1513-1516, he studied scripture and theology; the teachings of Jesus and Jesus' ministry in the context of the first century; passages of the Hebrew scriptures to which Jesus referred; the Psalms; and Paul's theology in the Letter to the Romans. He also studied how the teachings of Jesus and Paul contradicted the teachings of Rome. One of Martin's teachers told him, "*Repentance begins with the love of God.*" Over time, Martin discovered the gracious heart of God which had never been taught to him by the religion of Rome. He became convinced that God is love, the Gospel is freedom and salvation is God's gift through grace and faith alone. Luther focused his ministry on how the teachings of the church had changed over fifteen hundred years as it moved from Jerusalem to Rome and how his experience of God in Wittenberg brought him to spiritual renewal.

In the year 1517, Pope Leo needed to increase the income of Rome. He declared churches, including Wittenberg could sell indulgences to grant a full remission of all sins. Luther was tired of seeing people live with the superstitions of Rome. Indulgences were sold with the phrase, "*When a coin in the cup doth ring, a soul from purgatory doth spring.*" The Pope's proclamation was to be announced on All Saints' Day, November 1st, 1517. So, on the eve of All Saints' Day, October 31st, Martin nailed *95 Theses* to the door of the Castle Church to encourage conversations about spiritual renewal.

Through the history of Christ's Church, we have learned that centralization of hierarchical power always tries to use financial transactions to cheapen the value of a relationship with God. When Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple, he was rejecting this same idea that commitment to a relationship with God can be bought and sold. Jesus quoted the word of the Lord announced by Isaiah (56:7), "*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*" Then Jesus challenged the money changers, "*You have made it a den of thieves.*" **The Church of Christ in every age must be spiritually renewed by rising from the dead.**

From Wittenberg to Charlotte – De-Centralization

When Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door, they were written in Latin. He intended for those statements to be discussed by theologians and hoped they would generate spiritual renewal in the church. Yet, people translated his thoughts into German and, using the relatively new printing press to put Luther's ideas among the people. Because most people were illiterate, his words were read publicly and cartoonists also helped spread the word.

A significant event took place in 1520 when Luther refused to obey the Pope's order to stand down. In April of 1521, Luther traveled to an assembly at the order of the Pope. The religious and secular authorities all gathered. At the end of the assembly, Luther was excommunicated and condemned to be a heretic and a criminal. He could be killed without fear of retribution. On his way back to Wittenberg, Luther was kidnapped. The kidnappers took him to Wartburg Castle where he was protected. Luther grew a beard and changed his name. While safe in the Castle, he wrote '*A Mighty Fortress is Our God*,' other hymns and completed his greatest work by translating the New Testament from Greek into German. Once the German people had the New Testament in their own language, they wanted to know how to read. Social and political revolts ignited. Luther wrote guides to help church leaders and guides to help parents teach the core ideas of Christian theology in the home. Rome demanded that Lutherans return to 'Mother Church' but the German people wrote an answer, "*We protest.*" Thus, was the beginning of the official Protestant Reformation of the Church and Lutheranism.

Although Luther was a sincere reformer seeking spiritual renewal in the Church, he was guilty of major sin. Less than three years before his death, he wrote, '*On the Jews and Their Lies*,' saying, "... *Jewish synagogues and schools should be set on fire, their prayer books destroyed, rabbis forbidden to preach, homes burned, and property and money confiscated. They should be shown no mercy or kindness, afforded no legal protection, and 'these poisonous envenomed worms' should be drafted into forced labor or expelled for all time. He also seems to advocate their murder, writing '[W]e are at fault in not slaying them*'." There is clear evidence that those words were used by Hitler to convince Germans toward the holocaust.

Lutheranism was the first among many groups which protested against Rome. Multitudes joined a variety of movements emphasizing one or more different cultural, doctrinal or organizational points. Each tradition can trace its roots back to an imperfect German who lived with depression, guilt and fear; yet, who found a relationship with The Loving God.

What was a centralized church for twelve centuries became de-centralized over the next century. As Europeans and others came to this continent, first the colonies and eventually these United States, became a mixed-seed planting-bed filled with Pilgrim Separatists, Anglicans and Puritans from England, Lutherans from Germany, Presbyterians from Scotland, Eastern Orthodox from Russia, Greece and Turkey, Roman Catholics from Italy and Spain, Methodists from England and Baptists from Holland. Other religious groups arrived as well including Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, etc.

Religious pluralism created a need for religious freedom to be written into the foundational documents of this fledgling democracy. Whereas several European or Asian nations were oriented to an official nationalized church or religion, this nation has been offering a different model for the world. This new model of church/state separation – to put it mildly – is messy. And, of course, fundamentalists constantly strive to control the nation by their narrow views. Yet, thus far, we have navigated the waters of religious freedom without crashing into the rocks. Through the few centuries of America's history, we have seen new traditions ignite: Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Churches of Christ, Unitarian Universalists, Nazarenes, Assemblies of God, etc. There are now more than 200 Christian traditions in the United States. The average size of a local congregation in our country is 75. There are about 350,000 congregations in the USA and St. John's has more people involved than 330,000 of them.

Today, we do not celebrate the lack of unity throughout Christ's Church. Yet, we recognize the challenge for local churches today is the same it has been since Jesus walked into the Temple and overturned the tables. The choice is whether we will be a place of prayer FOR ALL PEOPLE or an extension of the bigotry that prevails in so many corners of our society; whether we will offer substance and sincerity or whether we will be an entertainment center for the shallow on the altar of institutionalism; whether we will be a community of active faithfulness and love or an institution focused on ourselves; whether we will offer a place where participation is based on commitment to God or reduce our expectations to the lowest common denominator of 'personal schedules, preferences and interests. *'Let the servant church arise, a caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ's sacrifice and clothed in Christ's humanity.'*

Indulging a New Reformation: Collaboration

Over recent Sundays, I have been reminding you that the same faithful and trustworthy Living God who has been present to God's people throughout the centuries is with you in this age of rapid change. The people of God are always in transition. Many voices cry out against the Church describing us to be out of step, stuck in the past and irrelevant. And, we should accept some of that criticism as right on target. Yet, while we search for ways to live and proclaim the Gospel of God's love in a violent and hate-filled world, we must refuse to sacrifice Jesus' call to cruciform discipleship. Let us love God with ALL of our heart, soul, mind and strength and let us love all of our neighbors as we need to be loved.

This past week, a friend was in a conversation with a person in a restaurant who was deeply confused and lonely. My friend asked, "*have you considered going to church?*" The person replied, "*Why would I to go to a place where people judge me, categorize me and ask me to leave my tough questions at home?*"

St. John's, I offer three ways for us to avoid the coercion, manipulation and hierarchical authoritarianism of centralization and the rampant disunity of untethered independence.

First, let us hold steadfast to the Good News of God's love as revealed in Jesus. Only after Martin Luther started relating with God as love could he offer a new vision of the redemption. The world needs the message of The Loving God. And, the only way our world will ever learn of a less hate-filled, judgmental, violent, condemning God is for us, as the people of God, to show them less hate, less judgement, less violence and less condemnation.

Second, let us renew ourselves to collaborate with all people who seek to reveal this loving God in the world. Through the past 50 years, St. John's has moved past connectionism and conventionalism. In the 1960s, long before the Southern Baptist Convention was taken over by political fundamentalists, the pastor of this church participated in Vatican II and introduced ecumenism to this church. In the 1970s, we adopted an ecumenical baptism position and hosted conversations to racially integrate our city's schools. In the 1980s, as several churches searched for ways to express congregational autonomy through historic principles of church freedom introduced by Baptists, this church hosted gatherings named, '*Theology is a Verb.*' We have numerous examples of collaboration in our church story. Today, in MT25 and Circles of Hope, we are renewing our energies in this effort of collaboration for the work of God in the world

Third, let us search for creative ways to deepen our experience of spiritual learning. The local church should be a community of spiritual and theological and practical ministry training for the people of God. The world needs us to be well informed about the issues of today; but more importantly, the world needs us to be formed by scriptural teachings and transformed by God's Holy Spirit. The Gospels do not quote Jesus as saying, '*take up your cause and follow a political platform;*' they have him saying, '*take up your cross and follow me.*' Jesus calls us to '*come to him and learn of him.*' My vision is for us to make spiritual formation such a core emphasis in our community of faith that people will come to us because they want to learn how to make a difference in the world as a follower of Jesus. What if we develop a curriculum for The Servant Church? What if we collaborate with others to develop a curriculum for a practical theology to help God's people become more effective Ministers in Daily Life?

Let me explain why we read this story of Jesus over turning the tables of the money changers in the Temple three times today. This story is so significant that it is included in all four Gospels. Although Jesus lost his temper, he did not lose his religion. Jesus was indulging a new reformation. The Passover tradition called the people to bring an animal sacrifice. However, rather than bringing an animal which they had fed, nurtured and to which they had become relationally connected, they were bartering in the temple to buy the lowest cost animal to present to God. They were going through the motions of religion, but devaluing commitment.

Beloved, God sends us forth to be in the world without being like the world. On this day, when we remember that God's people are always being transformed by the Spirit of God, I remind you that your spirit needs renewal like your body needs to be washed. Amen & AMEN!