

October 29, 2017 – Reformation Sunday
500 Anniversary of Martin Luther Posting 95 Theses
“Liberated by God’s Grace”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Psalm 46; John 1:1-5, 8:31-32, 18:33-38



This week is a very special one in the broader history of the Protestant church. This marks the 500th anniversary of reformed theologian, professor, and monk Martin Luther’s action of nailing his famed “95 Theses” to the door of the Wittenberg Castel in Germany. No one knows for sure whether this actually happened, but the stand he took against the Roman Catholic Church at the time was pivotal in changing the entire course of ecclesiastical history. Luther’s action resulted in a split from which emerged the Evangelical or Protestant Church. Luther’s “protest” is what got the whole thing started. Now before I go any further, are there any former Lutherans in the house? Any recovering Lutherans? Any self-identified Lutherans? It always helps to know your audience when preaching.

Within his list of protests, Luther was particularly concerned about three things. One, the unquestioned power of Papal authority – heretofore, “Papal infallibility” was not questioned. Luther began to see some issues. Two, the sale of indulgences, in order, to absolve the penitent from sin – Luther saw this as merely a scheme to build huge cathedrals and increase the coffers of the Catholic Church. And three, his belief that the priesthood ought to be manifest in the lives of all believers and not just the ordained. If you attended the ordination of Santina Poor you witnessed an example of that as everyone was invited to participate in the laying on of hands – not just the ordained clergy.

His refusal to renounce his beliefs resulted in his excommunication from the Roman Church at the infamous council known as the Diet of Worms where he offered his famous lines: “Heir stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders. Gott helfe mir! Amen! “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen!

On our trip to Europe this past summer I had the good fortune to stand at the foot of the statue erected in Luther’s honor at Worms. It was both humbling and inspiring to read these words and know that here was the place where Luther declared his truth – a truth that toppled the power of the church. A truth he was bold to assert and that could have cost him his life. But it didn’t stop there.

Luther went on to marry a nun – another extremely controversial move on his part further separating himself from his Catholic roots. By doing so he insisted clergy should have the ability to live “normal” lives and not be set apart from the experiences of

others. He insisted that salvation was granted solely by God's grace through faith and individual confession and not dependent on a priest's absolution. His translation of the bible into German put the Word of God into the hands of the people in a language they could understand rather than the vagaries of Latin that previously was the only version read. Doing so created an explosion of interest in the Bible and gradually eroded the intellectual propriety of the priesthood.

While Martin Luther was far from perfect – his anti-Semitic writings are a case in point – his life and theology changed the world and certainly is worth our taking the time to pause, and reflect, and to celebrate how his actions influenced us as a successor denomination, as well as what it means to us as disciples *“Liberated by God's Grace.”*

Regardless of how you feel about him, Martin Luther immersed himself in Scripture. He was a contemplative, and fed upon the “Word of God” daily for his understanding of life and what it meant to be an “Evangelical” a word he preferred in describing a follower of Jesus. His reverence for Scripture took him deeper into a solid understanding of “Truth” – his truth and THE Truth – God's Truth – which gave him the courage to stand against the ecclesiastical powers who thought sure they could control him. But as they soon discovered, someone standing in his/her truth is free indeed. No person or power can take that away.

To help illustrate this linguistically, I've asked two readers to assist me in offering the gospel today in a unique way. I invite you to listen closely as you hear the Word of God as recorded in John's gospel paying particular attention to the “Incarnate Word” AND precisely what sets us “Free.”

Read the Johannine Passages

The main passage centers on Jesus' confrontation, once again, with the controlling leaders of the synagogue who continued to try and find a way to disregard his teaching because it opposed the “truth in a box” or dogma that they purported and insisted everyone believe. His message was rather basic but so very important.

“If you continue in my Word” – no doubt a direct reference to John 1 where we read the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” He, Jesus, being the incarnate Word. “You are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.”

I included the later Johannine passage, because I think it asks a very important question – one that, I believe, Pilate honestly struggled with in his attempt to figure out what to do with Jesus as he asks, “What is truth?”

The reason why I juxtaposed these two additional readings with the assertion of Jesus' liberating assurance is my belief that both the religious elders and the secular prefect Pontius Pilate were asking the wrong questions based on the common misunderstanding that many still share today. Both factions believed that there is “One Universal Truth” for all humankind. It's a bogus assertion that often leads to animosity,

hatred and eventually violence as one “truth claim” is vigorously defended. While I believe that there are some common threads when it comes to truth, it is up to each one of us to realize our own truth in order to truly be set free. [Pause]

Most of you know it took me a long time to embrace fully who I am as a gay man. Up until that time, I accepted the truth that others had imposed on me – that which was expected of me. Rather than incur the costs of accepting my truth, I remained silent, hiding, shackled in others’ expectations. I became really good at performing but I was not free. When I came out, as painful as that was, I was free indeed. There was no more need to hide. I could look others directly in the eyes. I had a new sense of authority – that of living an authentic life – honest with self, with others, and with God. My truth allowed me to accept “The Truth” that I was loved by God – no one could deny that, and that Truth set me free to be fully who I am.

When we stand in that place, in our truth, it’s like standing in the eye of a hurricane. None of the chaos swirling around us can shake us or knock us off our feet. It’s impossible. Liberated by God’s grace we are blessed with stability AND the ability to listen appreciatively to the truth of others – with an open heart. And that’s the real pay-off.

You see how this works? It’s only when I know, accept, and affirm my truth do I have the ability to receive the same from another – even one whom I may perceive as my enemy.

Columnist David Brooks recently wrote an article entitled, “How to Engage the Fanatic.” While he didn’t use my exact words, the dynamics are quite similar. We cannot with any sincerity engage a fanatic (read – one who has a radically different opinion than mine) unless we truly understand who we are, what we believe (our truth) and we stand in that truth while holding the possibility that we just might be wrong. Only when we do that can we listen with compassion to the other – be that a religious fundamentalist, one of a different religious practice, a secular atheist, or a member of a rival political party, just to name a few.

Only if we are both standing in our respective truths – and not first and foremost defending our turf or with the intent of brow-beating the other – can we enter into civil discourse.

That is precisely why Jesus was so powerful.

When Pilate said, “Do you realize I have the power to grant whether you live or die.” Jesus almost chuckles to himself, “No one has that power over me.”

He was standing in his truth. No one could possibly have that kind of power over him.

The same is true for each one of us. When we stand in our truth – we will know THE Truth, and that truth will set us free. Martin Luther knew that when he said, “Here I

stand.” Jesus knew that when he said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” And we can know that when we live in our skin, embracing fully who we are, and realize that God’s love permeates every fiber of our being. No one can take that from us.

I’m grateful for the witness of Luther who reminds me, once again, that we are liberated by God’s grace and that gives each one of us the power to be truth, light, and hope as we worship and as we go forth to serve.

Allow me to close with words of assurance from that powerful hymn we sang earlier today:

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.
But there is one who takes our side, the One of God’s own choosing.
You ask who that may be? Christ Jesus sets us free!
With mighty power to save, victorious o’er the grave,
Christ will prevail triumphant!

May you know that truth – may that truth set you free!

Amen!