

October 27th, 2024

We are coming up to Halloween, which means we're also coming up to Reformation Day! On October 31st, 1517 (507 years ago) Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the doors of the Wittenberg Cathedral and sparked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation which radically changed Christianity and the western world. Today is Reformation Sunday. I don't always highlight it. After all, 500 years was a long time ago, and it seems a dusty thing to drag up — but now I believe recalling the events of the Protestant Reformation is relevant for us today.



Martin Luther (not to be confused with Martin Luther King Jr. the civil rights activist, who was named after the Protestant reformer) was a devout Catholic. He was supposed to become a lawyer, but in the middle of a terrifying storm, lightning struck the ground very close to him and he called out in terror to

St. Anne: "Help me, St. Anne! I will become a monk!" True to his vow, Luther gave away all his possessions and entered the monastic life. His father wasn't impressed.

He took on the role of being a monk with tremendous zeal. As he later commented, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I." He was always working harder to be a better monk and a better Christian. But the harder he tried, the more he became aware of his failures and shortcomings. He wanted to be righteous but the more he tried the more he was aware that he was unworthy and unrighteous. Any of you who identify as a perfectionist or who struggle with feeling like you are not enough — you've got something in common with Martin Luther!

Romans 1:17 reads: "The one who is righteous will live by faith." This is the famous 'Reformation Text'. But for a number of years whenever Luther read that scripture, all he could see and focus on was the word righteous — which he was convinced he was not. But one night he had a spiritual awakening. In that awakening he

realized the word he should be focusing on was not “righteous” but “faith”. *“At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open.”*

His entire worldview and paradigm for faith changed. Some of you have had that experience. It’s a pretty awesome experience to have when your poop-coloured glasses are taken off and replaced with clear glasses. All of a sudden, Martin Luther could see and feel the love of God. He realized that he could never ‘earn’ salvation. In other words, God didn’t love him, and he wasn’t getting into heaven because of the good deeds he had done — salvation was a gift from God. It was grace.

What is grace? I heard someone describe honey as grace. *“Honey is grace in a jar, a sweetness entirely given that we did absolutely nothing to deserve.”*

This revelation didn’t just change his personal relationship with God — it rippled out to affect his whole understanding of faith and the Church. He realized that part of the problem was his own church.

In all sorts of ways, Martin Luther now saw that the church was blocking that grace — and, in fact, *selling* grace. That was straw that broke the camel’s back and that had him nailing his 95 Theses to the doors of the Cathedral — the Church’s practice of selling Indulgences was selling grace.

Indulgences were a certificate that you could purchase that could shorten your time in purgatory (the waiting place between heaven and hell) or shorten the time spent there for one of your loved ones who was there already.



In truth, while the Catholic church believed this practice of buying an indulgence worked, it was also funding the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Luther saw it as putting a price on salvation — actually selling salvation.

Part of what is fascinating is that there was a new technology that made a huge difference. The Printing Press had been invented not long before Luther was born, and when he nailed the papers to the door they were taken and copied and spread all over Germany within two weeks, and then beyond! What might have just been one person's rebellious ideas, thanks to the social media of the Middle Ages, went viral — and many agreed with Luther. They felt oppressed by the church. Luther started writing more in protest to the church and the Pope.

Luther hoped to spark a debate and he hoped to reform the church. He got way more than a debate — he was excommunicated from the church and had to go into hiding.

During that time Luther wrote a huge amount, the most significant being his translation of the New Testament and later the Old Testament. The Bible was so important to Luther and he felt strongly that it needed to be in the hands of the people — and that meant it needed to be in the language of the people.

He felt strongly that it needed to be *in the hands of the people and in the language that people could understand*. A few people before him had translated the Bible into other languages, but for the most part the Bible was in Latin or in the original Greek and Hebrew, and therefore not understood by any who were uneducated, which was almost everyone! When the priests read it out in church, they read it in Latin.

Luther wanted ordinary people to read the Bible, and so he made sure the language could be easily understood.

Das Neue Testament Deutsch was published in September 1522, and it was described as a typographical masterpiece. He also included a lot of pictures, including some woodcuts from Germany's greatest Renaissance artist, Albrecht Durer. An estimated five thousand copies sold in the first two months alone! His Bible was a huge success ☺ it kept selling out. One of his opponents said that Luther's work was ***“So propagated and widely spread by the book printers that even tailors and shoe-makers, indeed women and other simple idiots, who had accepted this new Lutheran gospel...read it eagerly, as if it were a fountain of all truth. Some carried it in their bosoms and learned it by heart.”***

We are now living in the biggest technological shift since the time of Martin Luther, since the invention of the Printing Press. Just as Martin Luther, I might

even say, *God* used the Printing Press to help many draw closer to God, how might we use A.I. and other digital platforms to share God's love?

As I preach this message about Martin Luther, I don't mean it to be a big love-in for Protestants. It is part of our roots and part of our history (and I think it's important to know where we come from and why we believe certain things), but that is not to say that Martin Luther was totally right, or that we are totally right. For all the good Martin Luther did to bring God's grace and the scriptures to ordinary people, he wrote some horrible things about Jews, which were later used by the Nazis to justify their persecution of Jewish people. He himself was far from perfect. He wanted to reform the church, and he ended up by creating new church denominations.

The Roman Catholic Church in Luther's time needed reforming. Eventually, partly because of Luther, it did change and reform — but no church has it all right.

If you've been hurt by a church in the past, I want to say that I'm sorry. It shouldn't be that way. The church is meant to be a container for God's grace and God's love, and sometimes it ends up blocking that grace and that love. And sometimes, even worse, a church can be a vessel of hate. I don't think there is any greater sin. Jesus said *"A person who causes even one of my little followers to sin would be better off thrown into the ocean with a heavy stone tied around their neck. So be careful what you do. Correct any followers of mine who sin, and forgive the ones who say they are sorry."* Luke 17:1-3

Churches and individuals need always to be open to reformation. We're not called to be perfect. If God wanted a perfect church, then humans couldn't be part of it. We're not called to be perfect — but we are called to be open to criticism and be willing to change.

You'll be interested to know that today the Roman Catholic Church agrees with Luther — the guy they excommunicated and who split the church. 25 years ago in 1999, the **"Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (JDDJ)** was created and agreed to by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. It states that the churches now share "a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ." 75% of Christian churches have signed on to this joint document. This resolves much of the 500-year-old conflict over the nature of justification, which was at the root of the Protestant Reformation.

There is so much that divides us in the world, and so it's worth celebrating when we can come together and agree on things!

I don't mean in any way to set this up as "Aren't we so much better than the Roman Catholic Church!", because I think in some ways, our way is inferior.

I remember when I was doing a Chaplaincy stint in the Scarborough General Hospital, they had a large long-term care wing. Once a week we would conduct a worship service. There were two worship services: one Catholic and the other Protestant. I of course only ever led the Protestant one, but I often attended the Catholic service. It seemed to me that the Catholics were able to bring their people into the presence of God so much better than we could. Why? Because their worship was experiential.

The people knew the prayers and the practices absolutely by heart. In our context, we require people to be mentally and physically 'with it', and most in long-term care were no longer either. They could not hold heavy hymn books or read the words on a page, and they couldn't follow the narrative of a sermon or read the prayers. The one edge we had in terms of bringing people into God's presence was the music. So back at the Scarborough General I did what I could to help this group worship. I leaned heavily on what many in our tradition do know by heart: The Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. Every week we said both. And I leaned on hymns, in particular hymns that had a chorus that was familiar and likely to be known by heart.

I remember there was one gentleman who just showed no sign that anything was getting through until we sang the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic'. "*Glory Glory Hallelujah!*" That day he lit up and sang his heart out — so from then on, every week we sang the Battle Hymn of the Republic!

When we did a survey of our congregation, we found that 60% have a background that is not United Church of Canada! I kind of love that! I was born and raised in the United Church — actually I was probably baptized by the United Church of Zambia, since I was born there. But in Canada I attended a Roman Catholic primary school. I went to a Pentecostal youth group in my early teens, and then a Presbyterian Youth group in my later teens, along with working at a Presbyterian camp. In university I lived in an Anglican college, Dio, and fully participated in their worship. Many of you have other church connections today. Many of you are *bi-churchual*, and that is great!

No church has it figured out perfectly. We do well to hold onto our traditions lightly and in humility say, "We could be wrong." We do well to keep our focus on experiencing and sharing the love of God revealed in Jesus, who lived and died and rose to life and is alive today. I pray that you will experience the extraordinary, transforming love of God, and that you may be someone who, along with the church, helps to share that love with others.

Thanks be to God!