

July 9, 2017 – Different, Yet Related: The Lutheran Church © -- Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Romans 3, John 3

When I was considering returning to seminary back in 2004, my options in the Twin Cities were expansive. I could have gone to my Master of Arts alma mater, United Theological Seminary, but I lost my faith there. I could have gone to St. Thomas Seminary, the training ground for Midwestern Catholic priests, but I was not Catholic. I could have gone to Bethel Seminary, but I could not in good conscience sign off on the statement of faith they required for new students. Plus, the whole idea of signing a statement of faith to attend seminary seemed counter-intuitive to me. I didn't remember Jesus asking the disciples to sign off on a statement of anything in order to take the Gospel to the edges of the earth. There were several other options in the area as well. So, in conversation with my minister at the time, Rev. Dr. David Fisher, I decided to go to Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, for my M. Div.

I have no regrets for that choice, and as a lone Congregationalist in a sea of Lutherans, I deeply appreciated the rigorous academic focus, combined with real-world practicality. Rigorous thinking and practical application are hallmarks of the Lutheran Church and we would do well to remember that those hallmarks are therefore also foundational to the entire Protestant movement, which is said to have begun with Martin Luther.

Martin Luther, who was born in 1483, was certainly not the first to express outrage and concern over the practices of the Catholic Church of the day, which had held sway for almost 1200 years in Western Christianity. Luther was, however, probably the most intelligent and profound thinker of his age in Europe, and was therefore able to articulate concerns and issues in a way that was accessible to prince and pauper alike. It is perhaps best to say that Martin Luther is the nexus, the hub, the focal point which rightfully begins what we call the Protestant Reformation and the Lutheran Church.

Do you remember when we began this series a month ago, we had a picture on the bulletin of the Rose Window of Notre Dame Cathedral?

I said then that it represented and reflected the many perspectives of faith the Catholic Church attempted to contain under its structure and statements of belief. Well, the "Protest" movement begun by Martin Luther is like a big rock thrown right through the center of this beautiful window. Since Luther's day, there are now over 45,000 Protestant denominations around the world, of which the NACCC is but one.

And so, when we talk about the historical foundations and ideas of the Reformation, things get complex very rapidly. I tell you this because I am going to use very broad strokes to discuss something that is one of the most fascinating times in Western history, and also one of the most complex. 1350 to about 1680 represent one of the great Rorschach tests of anyone who talks about the history of that time. I will tell you as much about myself as the history of the time in talking about it.

Let's begin here: On October 31st, 1517, 500 years ago this year, Martin Luther had enough. Luther was an Augustinian monk, which was a strict order of monks who prayed many hours a day and studied Scripture diligently.

He was spiritually tortured by the thought that there was never enough he would be able to do to gain the favor of a God who measured each act in a scale with Jesus on one side and us on the other. His interior life tried his faith about as much as the exterior presence of suffering, warfare, poverty, and despair all around him. This poverty and despair was exacerbated by the presence of John Tetzel, who was the priest in charge of selling indulgences to the peasants of Wittenberg and surrounding villages. Indulgences are essentially vouchers or coupons which testify you have paid *x amount* for *some person* which releases them from *x years in purgatory*. The money was then sent to Rome so the Catholic Church could build the gold-laced, infinitely expensive St. Peter's Cathedral in what is now Vatican City. Luther saw indulgences to be a poor tax leveraged through emotional manipulation of God-fearing people by unscrupulous priests who got rich and enriched a corrupt organization that had long ago abandoned anything resembling Christ-like behavior.

Luther's ministry and the selling of indulgences was happening at one of the most vibrant times in the history of the West. 1517 was the cresting wave of the Renaissance.

Science, politics, philosophy, art, medicine, theater and poetry were all advancing in ways that were virtually unknown at any other time in known history.

Luther was a central and integral participant in this Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation makes no sense unless it is understood in the context of the flourishing intellectual dynamic that surrounded Luther at the time. The Catholic Church, which was essentially the primary power player in the Western world, did what it could to reign in what it perceived as existential threats to its power and control.

I think it is important to stop here and recognize that the Catholic Church was not opposed to new understandings or discoveries or even new ways of doing things. Modern science exists because Catholic priests created the scientific method, as an example. Music and art thrived because of the benefactors of local Catholic churches. The centers of learning and the expansion of knowledge from Salamanca to Paris to Wurzburg, Germany were all Catholic institutions. So it is not that the Catholic Church feared these things; what the Catholic Church feared was not being in control of those things.

The Catholic Church perceived itself as the guide and the potter who formed the clay of all thinking in the Western world, and they had the results to prove it.

But something had gone horribly wrong at the center of all that power and control, and on October 31st, 1517, Martin Luther, the priest who taught theology and philosophy at the university in Wittenberg, called it out by posting his 95 Theses on the church door. Church doors, by the way, were the bulletin board of the village in the day. It is not the church door that is important here, but what happened after Luther posted this.

1517 is only about 60 years after the invention of one of the most disruptive, creative, and powerful inventions in history – the printing press. Aside from the Latin Bible, the first mass produced public distribution of a challenging political/religious tract was Luther's 95 Theses. Very quickly, many thousands of people had their hands on his critique of the Catholic Church.¹

This catapulted Martin Luther into superstar status, and made him the de-facto leader of a free-wheeling explosive protest movement throughout Europe.

Almost from the beginning, he had the support of the German burghers and princes, who saw in Luther an opportunity to gain control of the money flowing out of Germany to Rome and keep the money in Germany. In 1521, Luther was called to trial by the Catholic Church and was declared a "vincibly ignorant" heretic, meaning he was well-educated and smart enough to know the truth but refused to accept it, which is the worst kind of heretic. (An "invincible heretic" is, literally, someone too dumb to know better). With Luther's excommunication, the provinces of Germany left the Holy Roman Catholic Church as well. Luther was asked to help them worship in the light of this new world separated from the foundational church of the Western world. And thus, the Lutheran church, along with Protestant Reformation, was born.

WORSHIP

Much of Lutheran practice, polity, and teaching is governed by the Book of Concord, which is a collection of writings, council meetings, and pronouncements that constitute 'the Lutheran Church'. In worship, the Lutheran church is what is called in Protestant circles a 'liturgical church'. What that means is that the acts of worship –

the candles, the way things are done around communion, the 'smells and bells' – are of primary importance. In a liturgical church, the ways of worship govern the expression of the Gospel. This is important, though: because there was for the early Protestant Lutheran church no longer a governing external authority, there was only one authority that governed the practice and expression of the faith – Scripture alone. And because Scripture was now the central authority, explaining what Scripture means became the primary aspect of worship. Hence, the sermon and the sacraments take on equal significance in the Lutheran church. The same is true for us.

THEOLOGY

Since Scripture was now the primary authority, now people had to go to Scripture to find out what God was up to in the world. Luther helped with this by translating the Bible into German, which allowed people to now read on their own rather than be told what Scripture said. When Luther did this – used Scripture as his primary authority – he found some

¹ The second most disruptive invention on par with the printing press is what we are currently experiencing now – the Internet. I contend what we are experiencing politically and socially is how we are getting used to a new vast technology, which has been available to 2nd and 1st world countries for only about 20 years. To understand how people deal with new knowledge technologies, for better and worse, study European history from about 1450-1750 CE.

interesting things. One of the things he came to understand is from our reading in Romans today.

Luther saw that no amount of merit, no works of any sort, no human effort of any kind would ever put us right with God. Salvation, the extension of God's grace to God's creation, was a one-sided, one-way act of God made permanent and accessible to all humanity by Christ's work on the Cross. Romans 3 says,

²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Lutheran theology, then, came to be expressed by what are known as the 'solas', or 'alones': *Christ alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, grace alone, and by the grace of God alone.*

In the 1500s, this was radical, mind-blowing theology. Luther would get into fantastically heated arguments with the great thinkers of his day defending these ideas. No one was more adept in his day, and perhaps since, than Luther in ravishing his enemies and opponents with the most creative insults and intellectual take-downs.

OUTREACH

If the receiving of grace is completely dependent on God's doing and not ours, then our attempts to receive God's grace by doing things can seriously compromise our capacity to act in the name of God. How do we really know we aren't doing things for God's favor, and how do we really know we are doing things purely out of gratitude for what God has done for us? The truth is, we don't.

For many Lutherans and Protestants who followed Luther, what once were common acts of Christians – caring for the poor, supporting neighbor and enemy alike in times of crisis, showing compassion and kindness to widow, orphan, and suffering alike – now became direct threats to personal salvation, examples of 'works righteousness' wherein we seek to prove to God and others that we are worthy of the salvation God has granted us. Luther himself rejected this view and instead called for what in our day and age we would call a 'radical mindfulness' towards how we are reaching out to others. For Luther, we help the poor and the suffering because Christ did these things, and out of gratitude and recognition of what Christ has already done for us, so we do for others.

To do otherwise is to turn in on the self and become, as Luther might say, a 'craven seeker of the demonic recognition of Satan himself'. Luther himself had a strong and compassionate regard for the impoverished and suffering and was recognized as a willing giver of help and kindness in his town.

STRUCTURE

With the break from the Catholic Church, the local church becomes of great importance. That said, Luther took seriously what he saw in Scripture regarding bishops, deacons and presbyters, which he understood to be bodies and entities that are accountable to

other bodies and entities within the church. It is this accountability to one another which makes the entire body of the universal church. And so, the Lutheran church has regional synods, bishops, and national associations that were often associated with the state government as well. As a result, there is a Norwegian Lutheran Church, the Danish Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, etc. To be clear, though, there are many Lutheran denominations, not one overarching Lutheran church.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Luther believed the first church a person experiences, and should experience, is the family. The devotional life of the family defined a person's commitment, involvement, and investment in a church. The spiritual disciplines of prayer, learning Scripture, and learning the meaning of Scripture – or catechism – become not only practices for the believer to participate in, but essential to one's development as a follower of Christ. Images from Enlightenment Europe and early America of family members gathered around candlelight reading Scripture out loud and praying together is a quintessential image of Lutheran piety and practice.

The surprise with Luther and Protestant Reformation, one which continually fills me with curiosity, is how quickly Luther's ideas flourished. Within a few years of Luther's 95 Theses, revolutions were breaking out based on his thoughts, new ways of doing church exploded across Europe. Within 30 years, the Catholic Church lost control of vast areas of territory, thought, and theology. Obviously, there was more going on than the Protestant Reformation, but the Reformation became the focal point and the hub for all the change that followed it.

From here on out, pretty much every church movement we discuss will owe its foundation to Martin Luther.

Luther considered John 3:16-17 - 16 *'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

17 *'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him -*

To be a "Gospel in miniature". What he says about it is a good place to end today:

Thus, Christ also has the form and the appearance of a sinner, but has become my salvation; his death is my life; he atones for my sin and takes away from me the wrath of the Father. The living, fiery serpent is within me, for I am a sinner, but in him is a dead serpent; he was indeed regarded a sinner, but he never committed any sin.

²⁸ *If, then, man believes that the death of Christ has taken away his sin, he becomes a new man.*

The carnal, natural man cannot believe that God will gratuitously take away and forgive us all our sins. Reason argues in this manner: You have sinned, you must also atone for your sin. Then it invents one good work after another and endeavors to take away sin by good works. But the Gospel of Christ is: If you have fallen in sin, another must atone for you, if a man believes this, he becomes one with Christ, and has everything that is Christ's.

²⁹ This Gospel, then, signifies that our works are nothing, and that all human power can do is useless, but faith in Christ does it all.²

AMEN

² From Martin Luther's first sermon on John 3:1-15, found at <https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=Luther|reference=Joh.3>. Accessed 7/7/17.