“Timing is Everything”

Romans 3:19-28

10/29/17

500 years! 500 years ago, is the day that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg Germany. This is the day that we remember as the one that changed the church forever. But things were happening for many years to bring about that day. Europe was in the midst of much cultural and economic change. In 1500 Europe was growing in population and quality of life factors like trade, technology, education and the arts. 200 years prior there was a terrible famine that devastated the region. Because of the famine, the bubonic plague hit people harder because of their lack of good nutrition. Some 40% of the total European population was lost because of the plague. By 1500 these losses were recovered with population growth. But unlike today nine out of ten Europeans lived in rural areas. The largest cities in Germany were around 30,000. The city of Wittenberg, the birthplace of the Reformation only had 2500 people. So kind of like Logan. So that made the transmission of information very difficult to a very spread out population. The printing press was invented in 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg. This propelled the transmission of information to new heights. It was also aided by the invention of a process to make cheap paper. Luther’s works from a small town in Germany were able to spread like wildfire.

Unlike society, the church seemed to be stuck in the past. Even when they did make adjustments, it was not good. Using money as the drive of the economy was a rather new phenomenon. The church was involved in having diplomatic agents and armies and they need to fund this. So they started levying a tax to the office of bishop. If you wanted an office, then you needed to pay a fee. The pope could leave that office vacant and earn a larger fee. Profitable in the short term but detrimental in the long term. For lay people, the payment situation to be bishops or clergy didn’t work well. Appointments went to outsiders unaware of local religious needs. Many clergy looking not to live in obscure places would pay an unqualified person to do the job for them. No wonder the church had some issues.

This all lead to Martin Luther. Luther was born in 1483 in Eisleben, Germany. He received his undergraduate and master’s degrees from the University of Erfurt. He was all prepared to study law as his parents had wished for him. In early July of 1505 he was trapped in a terrible thunderstorm while heading back to see his parents. He prayed to St. Anne the patron saint of travelers that he would become a monk if he made it through the storm. So when he got home he immediately enrolled in the Augustinian monastery on July 17th. He did not tell his Father until after he started. His dad was not happy. When his father came to visit the monastery, Martin assured him that this was a call from God. His father said, “Let’s hope it was a ghost.”

Luther was a very anxious young man. He was having a terrible time adjusting to monastic culture. All of the austere conditions, continuous prayer, worship, confession and study were getting to him. Luther remarked that monastic life drove people mad with its unnatural demands of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Luther became obsessed with the question, Where can I find a Gracious God? He kept thinking no matter how much he confessed or how much good works he did, it was not enough. Eventually he had a conversion experience in the library of the monastery. Here is some of what he said, “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with a very disturbed conscience. I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly I was angry with God. I beat importunately upon Paul in Romans. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, He who through faith is righteous shall live”. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. The righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith. Here I felt I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself.”

When we look at Romans 3, we can see where Luther went. Paul is writing to the church in Rome around the year 60. He hasn’t been to the churches of Rome yet, so this is a different letter than say the letters to the church in Corinth where he is familiar with them. He is also trying to get some financial support for his mission to Spain. He is addressing the division between Jewish and Gentile believers which has been reignited because of the return of some Jews from exile. Paul appears to be well known for his law-free gospel to the gentiles so he needs to address this community of care to stop the weakening of the churches. Can he reconcile them?

Paul is trying to create a single humanity that is devoted to the will of God. Paul’s argument begins with Romans 1:16-17. For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 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. The letter continues with the failings of both the Gentiles and Jews with the clichés that they had been shouting about each other. It culminates in Romans 3:21. Paul basically says, Stop! Both of you are wrong. But Now. But Now since the unjust execution of Christ and his resurrection, God is bringing you into right relationship in a new way. By faith. The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. This changes the usual sacrifice that believers would have been used to. Sacrifices occurred in the temple and were offered by a priest. There was nothing about the death of Jesus that would suggest it was a sacrifice instead of an awful execution by the Romans. This atonement can also be translated as mercy seat. Comparing this to the mercy seat which is the Holy of the Holies, the center of the temple which the high priest entered only once a year on Yom Kippur. Paul claims the unholy Gogotha as the Holy of Holies the center of God’s reconciling grace. God turns an unholy execution into a blessing. The Gentiles are now called to walk in holiness as believers in Christ. Paul argues that the power of Rome in the death of Jesus is removed and that God made redemption out of that execution. God responded to the death of Jesus as a sacrifice to make way for the whole earth to be atones. For people to be reconciled to God and to one another. This should be responded to with overwhelming joy.

That is what Luther did. After all the agony and soul searching he found freedom. Freedom in the fact it is not by what I have done that assures salvation, it is by faith, trust and belief in Christ. He found that freedom and was at peace. We tend to think of freedom today as being able to do what you want. Say what you want. Be who you want. Keep your options open. The freedom here in Romans is something different. It is the freedom to live your life to God and your neighbor. Freedom as a state of being and not freedom from a checklist. This is something that is embodied. Freedom because of God’s gift in Christ. With this new found freedom he did not need worry if he confessed enough, studied enough or did anything enough. Because of that gift of God, he was enough.

With this newfound freedom, he got to work. As an Augustinian, he was very familiar with Augustine’s work. Augustine was a great theologian whose works were prominent in the late 300s. He believed that the Bible was the primary authority and not the tradition of the church. He also believed that we were not saved by works but by the divine grace of God. These two central beliefs became the basis of Protestantism. Grace Alone and Faith alone and Scripture Alone.

While Luther was working out his beliefs, the catholic church began selling indulgences. These indulgences provided absolution to sinners. Johann Tetzel was a friar who was selling them around Germany. He was quite the charismatic huckster. He could be very well compared to many of our modern-day televangelists. His famous line was, ”When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul in purgatory gets his wings.” He was selling these indulgences to raise money for the renovation of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Well this irritated Luther to no end. Which eventually got him to create the 95 theses.

“Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences” is the real title to the 95 theses. Legend has it that he nailed it to the door of the Wittenberg church. It was more likely that he just placed it like a flyer. This was an academic discussion he wanted to have. But it took off like wildfire. We think that this document tending to be quite polemic, but it was rather humble and academic in tone. His first two thesis contained Luther’s central idea, that God intended believers to seek repentance and that faith alone, not good works lead to salvation. The rest of the thesis support the first two. It also reflected popular sentiment of the time, “Why does not the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the Basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?” This was all intended to be an intra church argument, not one that caused a schism.

This continued to spread and made it all the way to Rome. He had to go before several assemblies and he was asked to recant. He was excommunicated from the church by Pope Leo X in 1521. He then had to stand before Charles of Hapsburg, the king of Spain and newly elected Holy Roman Emperor at the Diet of Worms. There he said his most famous words, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of scripture or by clear reason, for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have erred and contradicted themselves, I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, for it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.” He was given a three week grace period to recant but eventually he had a warrant out for his arrest. He took a perverse satisfaction from this. He wrote to another reformer, Philip Melanchthon, “Be a sinner, Philip, and sin boldly! Only still more boldly believe and rejoice in Christ.” He was not killed as a heretic and the rest is history. The Lutheran church was formed and more reformations kept happening. The timing was everything.

So, what do we make of all of this today? How does something that happened 500 years ago affect us? This work by Luther and other reformers brought us to where we are today. I am not sure that we are winners because of this. We ended up with a very fractured Christian church. I wonder what Luther would say to all of these denominations that keep forming because of little differences? When is division enough to separate from the group you are with? That is a question that is old as time itself. One of the biggest things he did was read the Bible. The history of the world changed because one man read his bible! He then made it available to the common man by insisted that it be translated into local languages and be available to all. Sola Scriptura. By Scripture alone.

He serves as a great reminder of what freedom in Christ can do. When you discover your freedom in Christ, it can feel like the whole world is new. Like there are so many possibilities. You can be who you are. Who God created you to be. You don’t have to worry about how many good works you do. How you look to other people in the church or the community. Just worry about how you look to God. That new-found freedom can turn us to action. To help our neighbor and those in need. That freedom is a state of being which ushers us into the abundant life that God provides.

We are a church reformed and always reforming as our favorite theologian John Calvin said. What does it mean to have that reforming spirit? It may mean looking to the scriptures. It may mean not always doing it the way it has always been done. Many contemporary theologians say that we are on the eve of another reformation. We have seen a decline in church attendance. People say that the “millennials” are to blame for their disinterest in the institutional church. This celebration of the Reformation may give us some great insight in what needs to be done. We need to get back to the basics. Scripture. Faith. Grace. Use that newfound freedom in Christ and turn it into service. Here I stand, I can do no other. Where do you stand? Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Romans 3:19-28**

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

**Righteousness through Faith**

21 But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 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, 25whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; 26it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

## John 8:31-36

## True Disciples

31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’ 33They answered him, ‘We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, “You will be made free”?’

34 Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there for ever. 36So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.