

REFORMATION SUNDAY

October 31, 2021

READING

Romans 3:19-28

¹⁹Now 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. ²¹But now, apart from 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. ²⁷Then 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.

SERMON

Pastor Mark Bogen

Here I Stand!

504th Anniversary of the posting of Luther's 95 Theses

Good morning. My name is Martin Luther. And let me say first that I am not a civil rights leader of the 1960's. That would be Martin Luther King, who, no doubt, his parents named after me, for which I am unnecessarily flattered. That little act which I just performed by attaching a piece of paper to the front of the pulpit was a reenactment of something that I did on October 31, 1517, that is 504 years ago today.

On that day, I nailed a document not to the pulpit, but to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. I nailed it to the church door, because in that time, the church door was in many respects the bulletin board for the community. I knew that many people would be coming to worship the next day, All Saints Day, and would see the document containing the theses. In the theses, I challenged the teachings of the church of my time on the nature of penance, the authority of the pope and the usefulness of indulgences. I know that some of those ideas may be unfamiliar to you, and I will certainly try to clarify them during my message to you today. Anyway, my theses sparked a theological debate that would result in the birth of the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptist traditions within Christianity.

Little did I know that my theses would cause such a stir and result in such a multitude of teachings and denominations, and that one of those denominations would even bear my

own name. Let me make it clear that this was not my purpose or concern. My only concern and purpose was to bring changes and reform to the only church that I had known from my birth.

To tell you about how all of this happened, let me, first, tell you about myself. I was born on November 10th in the year 1483 in the city of Eisleben, Germany. My parents were Hans and Margaret Luther and were on their way to Mansfeld to look for work in the copper mines. The next day was November 11, St. Martin's Day, and my parents took me to the church where I was baptized and given the name of the Saint who was honored that day.

After a few days, my parents continued their journey to Mansfeld, where my father became a successful businessman. Having risen from the peasantry, he was determined to see his son receive a good education and bring further honor to the family. To that end, father sent me to schools in Mansfeld, Magdeburg and Eisenach.

When I was seventeen in 1501, I entered the University of Erfurt. There I received a bachelor's degree in 1502 and a master's degree in 1505. According to my father's wishes, I enrolled in the law school of that university. He was bound and determined that his son would have a profession that would earn him enough income to provide for his parents in their old age. As you will see, my parents were in for a huge disappointment.

Before I go any farther, I must tell you a bit about how the church of our day taught us to understand God and our relationship to him. For the most part, we were taught that God was a God of anger and judgment. A well-known image of Jesus Christ is that he was a judge seated upon a rainbow with a lily protruding from one ear and a sword from the other, signifying mercy to the saved and wrath for the damned, who were to be consigned one to eternal bliss, the other to everlasting torment. If there were best-selling books of this time, it would not have had the title "How to See Rome," but rather, "How to Avoid Hell."

How to avoid hell. That thought consumed me. One of the teachings of the church of my time was that those who became monks or nuns and joined a monastery had a better chance of avoiding hell and God's judgment. So, what I am about to tell you should come as no surprise. When I was 22 years old, in July of 1505, I was caught in a violent thunderstorm. A bolt of lightning struck the ground next to me and knocked me to the ground. In absolute terror I cried out, "Help, Saint Anne! I'll become a monk!" My life spared, I honored my vow. I left law school and entered the monastery in Erfurt.

My decision to become a monk for a while brought me some spiritual comfort, but it wasn't long before the old fears returned that I would be rejected by God, condemned by Christ, and consigned forever to the arm of Satan. And so, I became desperate. I engaged myself in long prayer vigils. I fasted – went without food for days at a time. I took off as much clothes as decency would permit. But I could never gain any assurance that any of my efforts would make me right with God and give me peace in my heart.

In the year 1511 I made a pilgrimage to Rome on business of the monastery, but I used that opportunity to visit sacred shrines and view sacred relics. It was my hope that by doing so I could get some of the merits of the saints transferred to my heavenly account, and thereby cancel out some of the sins that I had done and was under judgment for. I climbed on my knees the sacred stairs of Pilate's judgment hall, believed to have been transferred from Jerusalem to Rome, but when I reached the top, I doubted that what I was doing was having any effect at all in God's eyes.

I could not find peace with God in this way, and so I turned to the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of penance. Now the sacrament of penance includes three parts: contrition, that is being sorry for your sins, confession, that is stating your sins to a priest or confessor, and satisfaction, which is doing something that proves that you are truly sorry for your sins. But as I thought about this I wondered: How can I know if my contrition is truly sincere? And about confession – the sins of which I am aware, I can certainly confess them. But what about the secret sins, the sins which I may have forgot about. How could I be sure that I had confessed everything? If forgiveness depends upon confession and complete confession is impossible, what hope was there for me?

I thought that there still might be a way to find peace with God. In the history of the church there have been those people who the church has identified as mystics. Man, said the mystic, should cease his striving and yield himself to God. When this happens, the weakness of man is overcome by the power of God. But there is here a very important condition: Man must love God. At this point I began to sink even deeper into despair. I began to doubt if the God I was seeking was even lovable. I reflected on some of the teachings of St. Augustine, who taught that man's fate is already predetermined. Nothing that one can do will make any difference. The damned are damned and the saved are saved, no matter what. What fairness is there in this? Who can love such a God? "Love him? I do not love him, I hate him!" I said to myself.

I confessed all my thoughts and feelings to my confessor Dr. Johan Von Staupitz. He was for me such a blessing. If it had not been for Dr. Staupitz, I should have sunk in hell. He listened patiently to me, but to my deepest questions he could only answer, "Ich verstehe es nicht." (I do not understand.) But Dr. von Staupitz was a very wise man. He directed me to become a scholar and professor of the Bible. And so that is what I did. One might say that the Bible was given to me, and so I gave myself to the Bible.

My first lectures as a Bible professor were on the Psalms, beginning in 1513, and continuing for three years. I remember what a profound effect Psalm 22 had on me. This Psalm begins with the words Jesus quoted upon the cross, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" I reflected on that word "forsaken." Jesus forsaken, abandoned by God? That's exactly how I had felt. But why was Jesus forsaken? The answer, which I discovered through my study of scripture, must be that he who was without sin for our sakes became sin, and so identified himself with our sinful humanity, that he took unto himself the sin of us all. In this way he identified with us in our feelings of abandonment from God.

I continued to find hope and strength in my study of and teaching of the Scriptures. My studies and lectures on Paul's epistles proved to be life changing. I longed to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression the "righteousness of God," because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust, meaning me. As I mentioned earlier, this caused me not to love God, but to hate him. Yet I had a great yearning to know what Paul meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the righteousness of God and the statement from Paul in his letter to the Romans that "the righteous shall live by faith." Then I finally understood that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us through our faith. It was at that moment that I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.

The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “righteousness of God” filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven: Let me read again for you a verse that you have already heard in your scripture reading for this morning: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

This new understanding of the message of scripture has guided and led me in all of my thinking and teaching, and is the primary reason that I posted the 95 theses that I illustrated for you at the beginning of my message today.

The main impetus for the posting of the theses was the sale of indulgences by the church. Now, an indulgence was a document that was issued by the church, which when a proper fee was paid, declared that one's own sins, or the sins of a family member were forgiven, or that one's own or a family member's time in purgatory could be significantly reduced. The church engaged the services of one Dominican monk, Johan Tetzel, to collect the indulgence. It is said that in order to sell the indulgence he used a little advertising jingle that went like this: “When the coin in the coffer clings, another soul from purgatory springs.”

What infuriated me about this practice is that the church was trying to sell what God had already declared in his word to be a free gift – the forgiveness of sins.

The sale of indulgences was just one of many issues that I had with the church, and with whom I disagreed. Of course, church leaders tried to get me to recant my positions and teachings. I stood in front of several hearings to make my case and present my argument. The one that stands out in my memory happened at a city called Worms in Germany. It was a trial of sorts in which church and government leaders were present, most of whom wanted me to repudiate my teachings. I was asked this question: “Do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?” To this question I said this: “Since your Majesty and your lordships desire a simply reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. *“Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders. Gott helfe mir. Amen.”* Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

A question that I would like to pose to you today is this: Where do you stand? My hope and prayer for you is this: that you stand on the power of God's Word – that you claim God's free gift of forgiveness in Christ, and that this will set you free to be God's servant in the world. As Jesus himself says in the gospel you heard read today: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” Amen.