

October 29, 2017

“Reformation - Standing on the Word Alone”

Romans 3:21-31, John 3:16

Do you know that today is a BIG day for our Lutheran brothers and sisters? What are they celebrating? They are celebrating the 500th year of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, which Martin Luther started when he nailed the 95 Theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.

Does any one of you have any Lutheran background? Used to be a Lutheran, grew up in a Lutheran Church, or went to a Lutheran School or have a Lutheran heritage in your faith formation? Congratulations! It's your day too.

But not only the Lutherans or those who have had any association to a Lutheran Church, we all can celebrate and appreciate what Martin Luther stood for 500 years ago today. We, as Methodists, can directly thank Luther for having written the Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. For when John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was listening to the preface written by Martin Luther in a Bible Study on May 24, 1738, he had the experience of his heart strangely warmed, which we refer to as John Wesley's Aldersgate experience. It was a decisive moment in his life when John Wesley truly accepted “salvation by grace alone through faith” not only in his brain and mind but also in his heart, in his whole being.

So we the Methodists are thankful to Martin Luther whose writing led John Wesley to become the man who fully accepted God's grace and salvation “by grace alone” through faith, not by our merits or good deeds.

What did Martin Luther stand up for? (Any Luther student in this congregation? Salvation by faith alone, Priesthood of all believers, the Word alone)

What Luther stood for could be all summed up by “Only by the Word alone.”

-- Salvation of soul comes by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and not by following the church doctrine.

--Forgiveness is given by God through Jesus Christ and not by buying Indulgences; the money raised by it went to reconstruct the Basilica in Rome.

--We don't need priest's words to receive God's forgiveness. It's given by God freely.

--We can approach God without priests and the church system. We can pray directly to God.

--We can read the Bible (we don't need to be read to by priests) and sing praises to God in church (not just cantors).

All that the list is saying to us is written in the Bible, in the Word of God. The central theme of the Reformation is in today's First Lesson.

"²³ ...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,... ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

*²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified **by faith** apart from the works of the law.*

Even though the book of James says "faith without deeds is dead," (p.p. ¹⁷ *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*) it is not saying that we can gain God's grace and salvation by our deeds, good actions. Grace is what is given to us freely without our actions or deserving. Our good actions follow after the grace given by God, which is called "sanctification" in Methodist's terminology.

It is said that Luther only wanted to start a serious academic debate among the congregation of the church, where he served, regarding Indulgences, which not only Luther but others had had doubt about their legitimacies. Nonetheless, posting those 95 theses on the door to the Church for public viewing was a courageous act since they directly challenged the authority of the church at that time. It was like, in today's world, publishing a journal article, taking out a newspaper ad, or putting up an Internet website.

The fire Luther started spread rapidly. Within a short time Luther's Theses were translated into German from Latin, and received its support by a number of clergy and lay people. Luther continued to write and publish books, standing on his belief on the Bible alone.

On November 9, 1518 the pope condemned Luther's writings as conflicting with the teachings of the Church.

on January 3, 1521 Pope Leo excommunicated Martin Luther from the Catholic Church.

On April 17, 1521 Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms, an imperial assembly, in Germany. Refusing again to recant, Luther concluded his testimony with the defiant statement: "Here I stand. God help me. I can do no other."

On May 25, the Holy Roman emperor Charles V signed an edict against Luther, ordering his writings to be burned. Luther hid in the town of Eisenach for the next year, where he began work on one of his major life projects, the translation of the New Testament into German, which took him 10 years to complete. This was truly a revolutionary act since it made the Bible available to everyone, not just to the priests, who could read Latin and Greek.

On June 13, 1525, Luther did something else that shocked the Catholic world. In spite of his priestly vow of celibacy, he married. After giving some serious thoughts whether or not he should marry, Luther eventually came to the conclusion that "his marriage would please his father, rile the pope, cause the angels to laugh, and the devils to weep." He married a former nun, Katharina von Bora.

Many of the things Martin Luther ended up doing were revolutionary. Starting a debate about Indulgencies, which meant standing up against the practices of the church at that time, whose head was the Pope, was revolutionary. Translating the Bible into German, which made the Bible available to be read by the common people, was revolutionary. Marrying a woman, who was a former nun, was revolutionary.

Though he did not know what was to come after he had posted the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church, one thing is for sure. He tried to stand on the Word alone.

Although he was human in the sense that he had a temper that could have been tamed and some of his interpretations of the Bible have been debatable, one thing is for sure. He tried to stand on the Word alone.

Martin Luther was the assistant pastor of the Castle Church as well as a professor of Theology at the University of Wittenberg. Some of Luther's parishioners purchased indulgences and asked him about their validity. It is said that this led directly to his posting of the *95 Theses*.

It happens to us too. We may question and have doubt about something that is going on in or around our lives, or in the world. We do not agree with it, but we keep on

our lives with our eyes and mouths shut or pretending that it's none of my business or thinking that "I'd rather not be involved." We may think it's too big for me to deal with.

Something nudges or triggers, however, and we can no longer keep silent or ignore what is going on.

For Luther, it was when his parishioners came to him and asked about the validity of indulgences that led him to speak out against the practice of indulgencies and other teachings of the church of the day. Those parishioners came to him for his answers; for they had trusted Luther as their priest.

A similar thing happens to us too. When a student comes to us, his/her teacher at school or in Sunday School, with their questions, or when a child comes to us, his/her parent or grandparent, with their questions or doubts, that straightens us up to give them a sincere and truthful response and answers to their questions. For Luther the answer was "Only by the Word alone. Here I stand. God help me. I can do no other."

May we also stand on the Word alone in our search for truth, in our search for justice, in our search for the answers to life's questions and in our search for hope against hope, in our search for the peace that passes all human understanding. May we stand on the Word alone in our search for ethical and moral stands and in our faith journey.

Martin Luther's legacy continues as we do our best to stand on the Word alone, in every generation. His lasting influence continues as we participate in the ongoing need for reformation and the declaration of the biblical gospel in today's world.

Above all the most hopeful note God has given to us through the Reformation movement is that when the gospel seems most obscured, when the world seems darkened by untruth, it is then that God makes the light of God's truth shine through someone like Martin Luther, who courageously stood on the Word alone. God wants us to be the carrier of God's truth, God's light and God's Word today -- in our lives, in our families, in our communities, in our work places, in our church -to wherever we are sent.

May God give us grace to stand on the Word alone. May God give us courage to be the reformer today. Amen.