

First Unitarian Church

October 22, 2017

Funny story. One time, a young man, about 21 years old, was caught in a thunderstorm. A terrifying thunderstorm. So frightening, that the impulsive young man found himself bargaining for his life.

Have you ever done that? Gotten yourself into a bind, wanted something very badly, or landed in unfortunate circumstances, and tried to make a deal? If you give me a parking spot, God, I'll become a believer!

Well this young man did not just bargain with God. He went right up the ladder and bargained with the grandmother of God: St. Anne, the mother of Mary, the mother of Jesus's mother. *St. Anne*, he said, *if I survive this storm, I'll drop out of law school and become a monk!*

The storm blew over. The young man survived. The year was 1505. His name was Martin Luther, and twelve years later, he went on to change the course of history. On October 31st, Protestants and religious history geeks around the world will celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's pivotal moment as a radical monk.

You just never know what's going to happen in life.

A few months ago our former ministerial intern the Rev. Andrew Millard visited and preached here, and he also told some of the story of what happened next.

Luther turned out to be quite a well-regarded monk, at least at first. Luther received priestly orders in 1507, and was sent to teach at the University in Wittenburg at the age of 26 in 1510. There, he quickly became the university's leading theological thinker.

At the same time, Luther was struggling in his personal spiritual life. He sought to follow the laws of God as he understood them, yet he constantly found himself falling short. And even though his sins were relatively minor, he found that practicing confession did not ease his sense of disappointing God.

In fact, Luther was filled with self-loathing. He believed that humans in general, including himself, were completely unworthy of God's love. It is said that the first time Martin Luther took communion, he fainted because he felt so unworthy in the intimate presence of God.¹

Luther, you may have guessed by now, wasn't known to be a happy fellow back then. He was deadly serious. He could be blunt. He was temperamental and emotional. Eventually, Luther began to resent God for having made a whole bunch of rules that no one could actually stick to.

Ruminating on this, though, it eventually came to Luther that if it's so impossible to follow the rules, perhaps actions or *works* were not the be all and end all when it came to salvation.

In the same scriptures that are full of impossibly breakable rules, Luther saw evidence that God was using a measure other than works: faith.

God, he concluded, gave his chosen people a gift of faith that had nothing to do with their ability to behave perfectly.

In other words, he came to believe that salvation came through grace. A person should try to be worthy of it, but in the end it would be received as an undeserved gift from God. The person, finally, was helpless.

Well, realizing how helpless he was took a huge weight off of Luther's shoulders.

History recalls that Luther became a lighthearted fellow after that, "rather jovial," according to historian Jonathan Wright, quote: "a wonderful conversationalist who was equally fond of a good tune or [potty jokes]." Go figure.

The religious historian Diarmaid McCullough writes, "His release from tension, when he sensed his sheer helplessness was known to a merciful God as well as an angry God, was now the centre of his experience."ⁱⁱ It would also become the guiding principle of the Reformation Martin Luther would accidentally start.

Really, he was only going for reform, not reformation. Luther loved the church, but he was appalled by the behavior of many of its leaders. In particular, Pope Leo, a lavish, luxury-loving Pope, who wanted to make his mark by finishing the construction of St. Peter's Basilica [what is that].

And Leo had found a way to go about it through the selling of indulgences. For a price, a person could receive a slip of paper that declared they or their loved one would be spared punishment in the afterlife.

How could the Pope be so sure indulgences worked? I'm afraid the logic of the medieval church is beyond the scope of this sermon, but it is an excellent question. No matter. Indulgences had already been a thing for a thousand years by that point. They weren't especially controversial before, but then Pope Leo took them to a whole new level.

He put an ethically dubious fellow by the name of Tetzel in charge, and Tetzel was a real salesman, not afraid of stretching the truth. He played on people's fears that they or their family members—even their young children—would suffer in the afterlife unless they purchased indulgences. After all, it was impossible to be perfect. Better buy an indulgence. A hellish kind of insurance.

Tetzel cranked up the pressure and the fear tactics so much, that some people were spending their money on indulgences instead of taking adequate care of their families in life. What good is that hot meal, if you could die tomorrow and not be

saved? Sometimes in his pitches to sell more and more indulgences, Tetzel said things that flew in the face of church doctrine.

It was all too much, and Luther wasn't known for subtly. What he posted—nailed, actually— on the church doors wasn't an essay. It wasn't framed as an opinion piece, or some thoughts for others to consider. It was written as a list of facts, or theses. 95 of them. And they were very direct.

Like Thesis 27: "They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory."

And 32: "Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers."

Luther lambasted the Pope, saying that if the Pope can free souls from purgatory, he should do so for everyone, out of compassion, not for only some people, for profit. He should help people even if it meant he had to *sell* St. Peter's Basilica to do it!

In the social hall after this service, you can take a look at the ninety-five theses, and a volunteer, Jan Lee, has set out some poster paper where you can even write some of your own. What do you believe about salvation? About what it means and doesn't mean? About the right way to do church?

It's interesting that Luther's revolution had as its starting point the same fear the Pope was exploiting to build St. Peter's Basilica and fund a lavish church: the fear of God's judgment and wrath. But Luther didn't buy what the Pope was selling---and I don't just mean the paper indulgences.

Well, guess what, the Church tried Luther for heresy and excommunicated him. The church even issued an edict saying that if anyone were to kill Martin Luther, they would not be punished. I guess he got off easy, though. Others had been burned at the stake.

Like a young adult who suddenly sees his beloved but deeply flawed parents for what they are—mere humans—Luther's betrayal by the church that had been like his mother opened his eyes, and liberated his mind and imaginings.

Luther arrived at the conclusion that no tradition and no doctrine of the church was more important than what the scriptures say. All the methods of worship and practices were subject to change. *Sola scriptura*, Luther said. Only scripture had final authority as the word of God.

Christianity has never been at its best when associated with state power. What made the teachings of Jesus so powerful—and so threatening that he received the punishment for sedition, or rebellion against the state— was that he encouraged people to make a choice in where they put their loyalty. Previously, emperors were called sons of God, and their power was considered to be a sign of God's will and God's approval. People were supposed to worship them. Jesus challenged this.

“What made [the Christians’] demand new and shocking,” says the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, “was that it was not made on the basis of ethnic identity, but on the bare fact of conviction and conscience. For the first time in human history, individuals claimed the liberty to define the limits of their political loyalty, and to test that loyalty by spiritual and ethical standards.”ⁱⁱⁱ

By appealing to an authority higher than the state or empire, Jesus opened a door that could bring people together across national and ethnic boundaries.

When Christianity became mixed up with state power, the heart of that message was lost. In Luther’s time, archbishops sometimes had as much power as princes, and sometimes the same person was in fact both an archbishop and a prince.

In this way, the state and the church had placed themselves between individuals and God. And they’d put the connection up for sale.

Martin Luther, in contrast, was saying that everyone, through faith, has direct access to God’s grace and forgiveness, and does not need a human mediator. Before, priests had acted as though they were the only ones who could deal directly with God in matters of salvation. Now everyone was like a priest. He spoke of the priesthood of all believers.

It is notable that he said these things right about the time the printing press was invented, and bibles began to be available to the regular people for the first time. Previously bibles had all been copied by hand, and only a select few had them.

As more people began to interpret the scriptures for themselves, they took Luther’s words to heart, including his words about the structures and traditions of the Catholic church being less important than what is actually in the scriptures. And so the people began to create new churches.

Where the Roman Catholic Church had once been the authoritative Christian church across Europe, now Protestant churches also arose and claimed their place. And they evolved and branched into others, and others. Today there are Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, Congregational, and African Methodist Episcopal churches, and more. There is Mormonism and Evangelicalism outside the mainline Protestant fold. There are Assembly churches, Four Square, Church of God, Church of God in Christ. One evolution of Protestantism is this very church. I’ll talk more about how that happened on Thanksgiving weekend when I preach about what Unitarian Universalism is.

Now, Luther did think that our actions matter. Speaking in the gendered language of his time, he said, “love grows by works of love, thereby man becomes better. He said, “he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.” He said that indulgences should not “in any way be compared with works of mercy.” And that “he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath.”

But sadly, some of Luther's own other actions reflected a very cold, uncompassionate side of him. I'm referring to his anti-Semitism. Although in his early years Luther spoke of Jesus being born a Jew, and said Jews are "of the same blood, cousins and brothers of our Lord," over the years his rhetoric changed.^{iv} Eventually, he became harshly anti-Semitic—even calling Jews the "Devil incarnate" and accusing them of having no "common human reason, modesty, [or] sense."

His racist teachings would later be taken up by the Nazis during World War II, and many Christian churches, believing similarly—including the Catholic church—either did not act or were slow to act against the Holocaust.

It is important that when we remember him, we remember this also, explicitly, because what we do not say is as important as what we say, and in a time when anti-Semitism is again on the rise, we cannot risk silence being louder than words. Since then, churches have renounced his teachings, and we UUs also reject all anti-Semitism. We affirm that all people are one family.

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As we mark the 500th year since the Reformation, some preachers and theologians have been asking whether it's time—or saying it is time—for another Reformation. Others suggest the Reformation may never have ended. The ongoing spin-off of new traditions from the old does seem to suggest this may be the case.

With such a kaleidoscope of Christian and post-Christian churches, what would a new Reformation even look like? Gone are the days when one united Catholic Church dominated a whole continent. "Catholic" with a small "c" means united, by the way. The Catholic Church's very name came from its vision of being the one big united church.

There is vast theological diversity among Protestants today. But one thing is the same. We still have to be on guard for religion becoming a tool of the powerful. This includes coded references to it as a weapon of the state.

When people who claim "religious liberty" are actually seeking to impose their religious beliefs on others, and politicians back them, people of faith need to protest. Whether it is buying a cake for your wedding, or accessing the healthcare you need in order to live a healthy and self-determined life, someone else's church has no business in your private affairs. In fact, it impinges on *your* religious liberty.

When it looks like public leaders are sowing discord and destruction, as though to usher in the end times described in the chapter of the scriptures called Revelations, which were part of a genre never meant to be taken literally, people of faith need to protest and call for reform.

And when states behave as though they were exceptional, God's elect, allowing other peoples to suffer from economic or environmental oppression, or

discriminating against whole populations based on their religion, people of faith need to protest and call for reform.

We have to be on guard for religion dividing people, and we have to instead heed its call to bring people together.

The Unitarian Universalist church is a long way from Luther's theology. We do not preach that there is a literal hell somewhere, or a purgatory. But we know that "hell" describes very well some of the realities humans create here on earth.

Some of us still look to Jesus for guidance, while others reach beyond that ancient teacher, but we know that all people come from the same source, experience the same awe, bleed the same blood, treasure and deserve the same gift of life. Many windows, one light.

And, we also know that faith and works are not two different choices, but are two sides of the same coin.

Our faith in the sacredness of life and in the inherent worth and dignity of all people calls us to practice justice and compassion. Our practices of justice and compassion lead us to meet—to get proximate with— people we might not otherwise meet, which in turn deepens our faith. Love is our doctrine, service is our prayer, we say in one of our Sunday affirmations.

For Unitarian Universalists, "the Priesthood of All Believers" means that each of us not only is qualified for "direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder," one of our named religious sources. It also means each of us is called to embody love and care. It places the ministry of the church squarely in the hands of the people, not just the pastors. Shared ministry. We are called to a ministry inside and outside of our churches that serves and stands with the disinherited, the oppressed, and the poor.

This in turn calls us to what the Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams called "the prophethood of all believers." Prophecy has come to be thought of as predicting the future, but that's not really what it's about at all. To be prophetic is to interpret the present, it's to read signs of the times through the lens of a faith that calls us to equality, compassion, and mercy.

Dennis Butcher, a writer for the Alban Institute, which offers continuing education to clergy, has said "the church has a unique contribution to make to modern society, that of being a humanizing community in an increasingly impersonal world."

He said this in 1994, before Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms invited us to distill our interactions into carefully edited soundbites; before cyberbullies, back when trolls were mythical cave-dwelling beasts... and not your neighbor's adult son sowing discord and spewing abuse on the internet.

How much more impersonal life is now. We can have hundreds of “friends” who barely know us and who show us only a carefully curated version of themselves and their lives. You know what I mean? Do you ever think it looks like your “friends” are having a lot more fun than you, or are more photogenic, or have happier families or more perfect children or partners? Do you ever lose an hour to social media, only to disconnect with a deflated feeling and lower self-esteem than when you started?

Did you know that happens to everyone?

It’s like knowing every person in your town only through their bumper stickers and framed family photos.

And is it any wonder our political scene has become so divided, and some of the nastiest people have tried to seize a monopoly on religion? We don’t know each other. And if we want we can limit a great deal of our social interactions only to those who agree with us. How can anyone vote for (fill in the blank)?

Well, if you really knew them, you’d probably understand, even if you still disagreed. And vice versa. If they knew you, they’d understand what’s important to you, too, and why. And when people who disagree care about each other, politics –and life— does not have to feel like a zero sum game with absolute winners and losers.

The Presbyterian minister Jin Kim is calling for a new Reformation.^v He links these collective and personal dynamics together. He says younger generations no longer want to accept:

- Uncritical patriotism and American exceptionalism
- Unexamined white supremacy, both on the political Right and the Left
- Unfettered consumerism at the expense of global fairness and environmental sustainability, and endless consumption as a personal coping mechanism.
- The myth of individualism, which is a subtext of the American dream
- And religious self-righteousness or exclusivism in the face of religious pluralism.

But he suggests that what they are looking for is something only the church can provide. He says people are “searching for their vocation.” They need a sense of deep calling in their lives. He says they long for meaningful, deep relationships with other human beings. People are lonely, and need community that “functions like a diverse yet intimate family.”

They need something to ground them that transcends the instability of our world, something that is concrete in a world full of virtual forms of existence. And they desire an authentic kind of religious faith that does not gloss over realities. To that I would add, including the realities of science and human nature.

And I would say, it isn’t just younger people. People of all generations long for these things.

“The church has a unique contribution to make to modern society, that of being a humanizing community in an increasingly impersonal world.” This is true now more than ever. It is crucial. Saving, even. Salvific.

By faith and grace and by our works, may we live into that calling and that potential more each week.

ⁱ Wright, Jonathan. Heretics. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Boston, 2011. (162)

ⁱⁱ McCullough, Diarmaid. The Reformation. (120)

ⁱⁱⁱ Williams, Rowan. “The Two Ways.” *Plough Magazine*. 14: Reformation. Accessed online October 19, 2017. <www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/discipleship/the-two-ways-williams>

^{iv} Qtd. in Marans, Rabbi Noam. “On Luther and his lies.” *Christian Century Magazine*. 25 October 2017. Print. (10)

^v Kim, Jin. “Time for a New Reformation: Stirrings of a Local Church.” *Plough Magazine*. 14: Reformation. Accessed online, October 19, 2017. <<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/intentional-community/time-for-a-new-reformation>>