

“Reformation at 500”

Date: October 29, 2017 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Reformation Sunday **Text:** John 17:20-25 **Themes:** Reform, Repentance, Healing

According to the well-known story, on October 31, 1517, a young monk and professor of moral theology named Martin Luther nailed a list of arguments against corruption in the Catholic Church to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

This list, better known as the Ninety-five Theses, was distributed far and wide, along with Luther’s fiery sermons that followed, with the aid of a new technology called the printing press. This event, and the controversy that followed, provided the spark for what one scholar calls the “most significant event in Western Christian history.”

Luther’s grievance with the Catholic Church was based in concerns about the selling of indulgences, which were essentially pardons for sins in exchange for money. However, Luther’s argument also extended beyond corruption into theological concerns about salvation, grace and the role of laity in the church.

Now, even though the United Methodist Church finds its roots in the *Anglican* tradition and not in the lineage of Luther, each year the last Sunday in October is set aside as Reformation Sunday to commemorate the Reformation and the role it played in shaping the church.

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and the Council of Bishops has called upon United Methodists everywhere to “mark this occasion with study, prayer and joint worship with ecumenical partners.” Bishop Michael Watson, the ecumenical officer of the Council of

Bishops writes, "As a body of believers born out of an ongoing movement for reformation and renewal, we Methodists should not let this moment pass by without marking its significance." This is a big deal.

In many respects, Martin Luther was a man created for his time. His birth in 1483 came at a time of political, social, technological and educational changes. Oppressive feudalism in the Middle Ages was colliding with the liberating ideas of the Renaissance. European nobility represented secular power and land ownership. Struggling peasants made up 90% of the population and did the heavy lifting of labor. The church represented the educated elite who embodied spiritual power, with a healthy dose of land ownership thrown in.

The printing press, invented in the mid 1400's, allowed new ideas of reformation and change to circulate more widely than ever before. Humanists, artists and poets of the Renaissance offered a new understanding of human existence and spiritual truth. The Renaissance shifted the power structure from the elite to the individual. Emerging ideas would later give birth to a new form of government known as democracy. The climate was ripe for change.

Luther was not the first to suggest a need for change, indeed there were others before him, and there would be others who came after him. And so it is really proper to speak of Reformation as a *movement*, and not as a date. Luther was not the only Reformer, but he certainly gets the spotlight of attention.

So what are some of the major themes of the Protestant Reformation? Luther enthusiastically embraced the idea of the priesthood

of all believers, which meant that Christians didn't require an intermediary to commune with God. He believed it was the duty of each individual Christian to enter into a personal relationship with God.

In the pursuit of this task, Luther translated the Bible into German, the language of the people, along with worship services that had historically only been conducted in Latin.

In an interview with Rev. Johannes Block, the pastor of Wittenberg's Evangelical City and Parish Church where Luther preached some 2,000 sermons, he said: "the Reformation led to the idea that *you* are responsible for yourself. Everybody is responsible for his or her faith. It's a step towards democracy. Everybody is equal in the church." In other words, faith was no longer going to be controlled by gate-keepers, it would be freely available to the masses.

The Reformation also paved the way for the future of our own denomination. It is arguable that without Luther, the Wesleyan movement would not have been possible two centuries later. In fact, it was Luther's own preface to the Book of Romans that sparked Wesley's spiritual awakening on the night of May 24, 1738, when "his heart was strangely warmed."

Additionally, when United Methodists claim that every person is called to ministry, whether they're laity or clergy, they're echoing Martin Luther's arguments.

Another of the primary themes of the Reformation had to do with the means of salvation. Luther was opposed to the doctrine of salvation by works and the practice of selling indulgences. These were actual

certificates that people could purchase from the Church that absolved them of their sins and promised their salvation and eternal life. Pope Leo X called for the sale of indulgences in Germany to help raise money to complete the construction of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. The Pope said that those who purchased the indulgences would be absolved of all their sin.

Well, some of Luther's parishioners purchased these indulgences and they asked Luther about their validity. This led directly to the posting of the *95 Theses*. Luther argued that salvation could not be obtained by purchasing indulgences, through works of charity, by making a pilgrimage or by performing other acts of piety and devotion.

He argued that salvation was an act of God, given by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. God has already provided for our salvation by the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus; and salvation is ours to accept through faith, not to achieve through works.

This is an important date in history, the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. But it must also be acknowledged that the Reformation led to serious and often violent conflict within the church. Luther may never have intended to create a schism, but we now live in a world with more than 45,000 different Protestant denominations.

So, in addition to remembering the positive aspects of the Reformation we also need to reflect on the negative consequences as well. In many of the articles that I have read in preparation for today, the word that I heard repeated over and over again was *repent*.

For what do we need to repent? We need to repent for the brokenness and dividedness of the Body of Christ. In today's Gospel

lesson we read Jesus' great prayer for the Church, that we might all be one. Sadly, there is anything but unity in the Body of Christ; we are extremely divided. We need to continue to pray for the healing and the unity of the Church.

In the last 100 years or more we have seen great strides in the Ecumenical Movement, those dialogues that are taking place between the various parts of the Body of Christ. We can celebrate the progress we have made in the healing of Christ's broken body, and we can also pray for more healing.

As we move forward, it may be helpful to try and see what we have in common with our sister churches, rather than looking at what separates us. There's a new company called Ancestry.com that has made looking at our DNA popular. As Christians, if we look at our DNA I think we'll discover that we have much in common.

As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, perhaps we can best honor this occasion by using it as a time to heal the wounds, rather than celebrate the differences.

The Church has always been in need of reform, and will continually be in need of the purifying work of the Holy Spirit. May we daily submit our lives, and our churches, to the will of God, seeking what God desires and not what our human egos desire.

As we remember the events that sparked the Reformation, may we do so with thanksgiving for the good that came out of it, with repentance for the pain and divisions that resulted, and with hope for all of our churches to reflect the love of Jesus Christ in a way that attracts others. Amen? Amen.