



The Reformation at 500: The Roots of Reformation

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Second Sunday after Pentecost

A Sermon Preached by Jack Cabaness
Katonah Presbyterian Church

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” –Matthew 4:17

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. –The First of Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses (1517)

Today we begin our summer sermon series on the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. I’m interested in this series not only because I’m captivated by church history but also because I know that many of us in this congregation have Roman Catholic backgrounds; more than a few of us are still technically Roman Catholic even after worshipping at KPC for years. More than once someone at KPC has come up to me and said, “I’m sorry, Father, I won’t be able to make it to mass this Sunday!” I mention this not to put anyone on the spot, but simply to note in a light-hearted way how deeply ingrained our religious habits can be.

When I’m a guest in a Roman Catholic service, and it’s time to say the Lord’s Prayer, I do remember to say “trespasses” instead of “debts.” But the thing that I always forget is that the Roman Catholic version of the Lord’s Prayer is shorter than the Protestant versions, and when the entire congregation has finished saying “deliver us from evil,” mine is the only voice adding: “For thine is ...”

Over the course of this summer, we will have fun observing the light-hearted differences and commonalities between us, and we’ll examine deeper issues as well. As we mark the anniversary, do we celebrate it or do we commemorate it? On the

one hand, there are many things to celebrate. The Presbyterian Church (USA) wouldn't exist without the Protestant Reformation, at least not as we know it. There are many things in our heritage about which we should be grateful. Yet we are also acutely aware that the reformations of the sixteenth century led to persecution, executions, long-lasting wars, and continual divisions in the body of Christ, and for this reason many voices suggest that commemoration is the better approach.

For many of us these divisions are not just sad but interesting chapters in a history text book, they are sad and tragic chapters that have played themselves out in our own families. Perhaps your parents or grandparents were ostracized because they married "outside the faith." Perhaps you've been ostracized because you no longer worship in the church of your childhood. I have childhood memories of fundamentalist Protestant preachers and my own grandmother telling me that my Roman Catholic friends, with whom I grew up in El Paso, Texas, would be going to hell; and many of you who grew up Roman Catholic in the years before Vatican II likewise have memories of priests and nuns telling you that your Protestant friends would be going to hell. Sadly, we got to be very good at condemning each other.

This is why I'm grateful for the voice of Martin Luther reverberating across history calling the entire church to repent--not just Catholics, not just Protestants, but all of us. The church in 1517 needed to repent. And the church in 2017 needs to repent. In the first of his 95 theses, or propositions for debate, that Martin Luther nailed to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany, he wrote, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." At the time he had no idea that he would one day be regarded as the founder of a separate church or movement; in his mind he was simply calling the entire church as he knew it to repentance.

Some scholars wonder whether Martin Luther literally nailed the theses to the church door. They wonder whether that is more legend than fact. At any rate, the act of nailing a list of theses to the church door may or may not have been as radical as it sounds because the church door really functioned as a kind of university bulletin board, much like the Katonah Village Improvement Society bulletin board near the train station. It wasn't the act of nailing the theses to the church door that was so radical; it was what Luther was saying in those theses! Originally, Luther only intended to debate his university colleagues in Wittenburg, but thanks to the relatively recent invention of the printing press, Luther's ideas spread like wildfire and the German Reformation was under way.

There were three specific issues facing the church in Luther's time that prompted his call for repentance. The first issue was the lack of education among the parish

priests. Many of them did not understand the Latin of the Mass that they recited every day. Many of the parishioners tended to view what the priest said in largely magical terms anyway—for instance, the phrase “hocus pocus” comes from that point in the Mass when the priest would say *hoc est corpus meum* (“this is my body.”)

But the lack of education among the clergy also meant that basic Christian doctrine was not being communicated either. After the invention of the printing press, many of the laity began reading for themselves. For example, in Geneva in 1536, just prior to the city turning Protestant, members of the congregation were known to interrupt preachers, challenging what was said on the basis of the parishioner’s own readings in the Bible and shouting the preachers down when they could not respond to the parishioner’s satisfaction.

A second issue facing the church at this time was widespread concubinage. The local priests were required to be celibate, but many of them lived openly with women and simply paid an annual fine to the bishop, which the bishop was only too happy to receive. Rodrigo Borgia, after he had become Pope Alexander VI, made his illegitimate son a cardinal and put him in charge of the papal armies. How many things are wrong in that one sentence?! If you watched the Borgias miniseries on Showtime, you might be familiar with much of that story. Reform-minded people across the church grew increasingly dismayed at a church that taught one set of practices as official doctrine but lived out a very different set of practices in reality.

A third issue, and one that particularly incensed Martin Luther, was the selling of indulgences. An indulgence was a way of reducing the amount of time that a deceased person had to spend in Purgatory in exchange for a fee. The selling of indulgences had helped to fund some of the Crusades a few centuries earlier, and they helped to fund the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Indulgence preachers like Johan Tetzel would go around and try to convince people to buy indulgences. Tetzel is said to have come up with the jingle,

as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs

It rhymes in German, too. And Tetzel was not above using emotional manipulation. He would lay on the guilt, saying such things as “for only a few coins, you can alleviate the suffering of your loved one in Purgatory. Are you really going to pass up such an opportunity?”

In addition to the growing, widespread church-wide concern about all three of these issues, the Humanist movement was growing and helping to sow the seeds of reform. A humanist was a student of the humanities, a group of subjects that

included rhetoric, moral philosophy or ethics, history, and poetry. They looked to the past for sources of truth and goodness. They read the classics in Greek and Latin, and they wanted to read the Scriptures in the original Hebrew and Greek. One of their rallying cries was “ad fontes”--back to the sources. One of the humanists was Desiderius Erasmus. Some of said that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched. Erasmus and others began to question many of the traditional teachings of the church based upon their new reading of the Scriptures in Hebrew and Greek.

For example, in today’s gospel passage from Matthew, where Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” Jerome’s Latin Vulgate had said “Do Penance.” Erasmus and others realized that a better translation of the Greek word *metanoite* was repent. Instead of undergirding an elaborate church system of penance and indulgences, Jesus in the Gospels was simply calling us to repent, to stop taking our lives down one direction, to turn around, and begin taking our lives in a new direction. That was why Martin Luther began his 95 Theses with a call for repentance. Repentance is something that a believer is always called to do during his or her lifetime. It is not dependent upon whether or not your survivors buy an indulgence after you die. In the rest of the 95 Theses, Luther goes on to question the power of the pope to extend indulgences to souls in purgatory, especially when salvation is really a gift given by a righteous God.

In a nutshell, these were many of the factors leading up to the Reformation.

What are the roots of reformation in our own time? Just as the printing press helped Reformation ideals spread like wildfire 500 years ago, the internet has utterly transformed our communications and the ways that we connect or fail to connect with one another.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is drawing near.” Repent, and change the direction of your life, Jesus said, because God is doing a new thing.

I believe, and so many others believe, that God is doing a new thing in our lifetimes. It’s difficult to describe with precision because we are alive while it’s happening. We don’t have the benefit of the hindsight of history yet.

The late religion journalist and author Phyllis Tickle once said that every 500 years or so the church conducts a giant rummage sale. Of course, this congregation puts on a giant rummage sale every year! But in Tickle’s analogy every 500 years or so the worldwide church decides which of its essential beliefs and practices it will hold onto and which ones it will discard and put up for sale. If the last great Rummage Sale was the Protestant Reformation, then we are due for another one.

Tickle says we are entering a new era of “The Emergent Church,” a religious movement that crosses denominational boundaries, seeks common ground, engages diverse cultures, embraces social causes as ways to live out Christ’s call to serve others, and takes place largely outside of church buildings. Is this the church of the future?

We will ponder that and many other questions throughout the summer. Behind me are some of the church’s most treasured possessions that I believe we will always cling to. The Bible on the lectern reminds the church that God is still speaking, that God still has a word for us. The baptismal font reminds us that even in the midst of dizzying changes that God claims us in the waters of baptism and reminds us that we belong to God. The communion table reminds us that God feeds us and gives us the spiritual nourishment we require. These are some of the many things that we will hold onto.

We might accidentally sale a communion tablecloth during the Rummage sale, but we’re not getting rid of the table! There will always be a reminder of how God cares for and nourishes each one of us.

As we decide what we keep or what we discard during this giant church-wide Rummage sale, the most important question for us is to keep asking ourselves what our mission is. Many bloggers and preachers have said that the church is currently facing its “Kodak Moment.” The Kodak company ran into trouble because they believed that their mission was to make film. And nowadays few people buy film. But making film wasn’t really their true mission. Their true mission was to preserve images and make memories, whether that was through film or the digital camera technology that they were too slow to embrace.

The most basic message of Christianity is one of resurrection and renewal. Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is drawing near.” Let’s go, boldly and faithfully, where God leads us.

All glory and praise be to our God. **Amen.**

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This Reformation came out of the Christian practitioners frustration with the Catholic faith. These reformers believed that the Catholic Church was not paying attention to the doctrine in the Bible and was spending too much time creating beliefs that did not align with the Bible. They also were upset with the way that the leaders were chosen in the Catholic Church. The main reformers in the Protestant Reformation were Martin Luther, Henry VIII and John Calvin. Martin Luther is considered the prominent man behind the Reformation because he wrote "95 Theses" in 1517, which spoke to his ideas that the Bible should be the tool used to determine religious rules and not tradition. His "95 Theses" were what sparked the debate and led to the Reformation.