

A Conversation with Martin Luther

Romans 3: 21-24

Center Harbor Congregational Church – October 29, 2017

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PRAY

NARRATOR: The paraments are red this week because this is Reformation Sunday.

The Protestant Reformation began 502 years ago this week.

We owe so much to the man who began it all, Martin Luther. It is because of Luther that we have English language Bibles. Because of Luther, we sing hymns. Because of Luther, we understand worship to be the work of the people, not just something the priest does while we watch. Because of Luther, we know that we are all priests, permitted to approach God directly, without the intervention of priest or church. So, in thanks for all these gifts, I thought we would spend a little time this morning getting to know Martin Luther. It is a good story, actually!

Luther was born in 1483, the oldest son of a miner, and his father wanted him to rise in the world, so he scrimped and saved to send him off to university and then to law school, with hopes that he would return to his hometown one day and become the mayor. But Luther REALLY hated law school, and he wanted to drop out.

Why, here he is now! Luther, why don't you tell us about how you left law school?

LUTHER: It was a dark and stormy night, actually. I hadn't been in law school very long when I went home for a visit. Walking back to campus afterward, I was crossing an open field when a storm came up. It was terrible! The lightning crashed and the thunder rolled and it knocked me right to the ground. I cried out to St. Anne. I promised her that if she helped me survive, I would become a monk. Sure enough, I lived through the storm, and I kept my promise.

NARRATOR: How did your father feel about that?

LUTHER: Well, he wasn't happy about it, but what could he say? A promise to a saint has to be kept.

NARRATOR: In the monastery, "Luther threw himself wholeheartedly into efforts to achieve his own salvation. Between [the] six worship services of each day, [that all monks attended] ..., Luther sandwiched intense prayer, meditation, ... spiritual exercises," Bible reading, and lengthy confessions. He went even further and began self-flagellation – beating himself with chains – in an effort to become acceptable to God. No matter what he did, Luther just couldn't believe that he had done enough to please God.

LUTHER: That was when I was in The Troubles. I was beset. I was terrified of damnation!

NARRATOR: Looking at Luther with a modern eye, we would say he was deeply depressed. He despaired not only for his life but for his very soul. He

wasn't alone in this. The church spent a lot of effort in those days making people afraid of death and damnation, and death was all around them – the plague ran through the neighborhood every few years.

Depression or no, Luther was truly brilliant, so his supervisor in the monastery sent him back to the university to study theology this time, in part to keep Luther from going 'round the bend mentally. Besides, the local prince was building a new university in the little town of Wittenberg, and the monastery supervisor had promised the prince that he would find someone to teach theology there, so off Luther went. He earned a doctorate in record time and became a professor of the Bible, a book that even monks and priests rarely read in those days. Still, he was depressed.

LUTHER: I was REALLY depressed!

NARRATOR: But depression wasn't Luther's only ailment. I'm really sorry to tell you this (and I wouldn't say it at all if it weren't such an important and famous part of the story). Luther was also chronically, horribly constipated, and he didn't care who knew it. Fortunately, he did some of his best work in the bathroom, where he spent hours and hours...

LUTHER: Hours and hours!

NARRATOR: ... thinking about the Bible. He especially thought about Paul's letter to the Romans.

LUTHER: Hey! I DID do a lot of my best work in there! In fact, that's where I was sitting when it finally hit me – salvation is a free gift of God, not something we can ever earn! So, don't be making fun of the bathroom!

NARRATOR: Luther summarized his principles like this: Salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

LUTHER: And I found myself pretty alone because of all this!

NARRATOR: These were radical ideas in the early 1500s!

About this same time, Pope Leo X wanted to build St. Peter's basilica, the one you see on TV every Christmas. He began selling a lot of indulgences – sort of “get out of hell free cards,” and they weren't cheap. The pope sent a man named Tetzel into Germany to sell these indulgences, to finance the construction in Rome. Tetzel preached terrifying sermons about the tortures of hell and purgatory and then said, “As soon as the coin into the box rings, a soul from purgatory to heaven springs.”

Luther's parishioners came to church showing off their “get out of hell free cards,” bragging that they didn't have to come to confession anymore because now they had tickets to heaven.

LUTHER: I was furious that the pope was selling God's forgiveness for the people's hard-earned silver, when God was giving it away for free!

I was so mad that I did what we always did in those days – I tried to set up a debate. I wrote out 95 propositions, or “theses,” explaining that Tetzel was abusing the church’s power and authority in selling indulgences. I marched right over to the castle church and nailed my propositions on the door so my university colleagues could see them and come to debate me about them.

NARRATOR: That was on October 31, 1517, 502 years ago this week, the day we celebrate as the start of the Reformation. Nailing his 95 theses on the church door wasn’t a sign of disrespect to the church. That’s where all notices were displayed. It was sort of like the town bulletin board.

LUTHER: Things got a little crazy then. The pope ordered me to stand trial. In 1518, a year after I nailed up my propositions on the church door, they sent a cardinal to accuse me. I wouldn’t recant. A year later they sent their very best debater, Johannes Eck, to challenge me. He called me a Hussite!

NARRATOR: John Huss had been burned at the stake for heresy.

LUTHER: Well, Eck just got under my skin. He got me so riled up that I finally shouted that probably some of Huss’s ideas were actually scriptural, and that, by the way, this meant that the pope could make mistakes. You should have heard the gasps around the room when I said that!

The next year, in 1520, the pope wrote a long letter giving me 60 days to recant or be excommunicated. That turned out to be sort of funny, actually. The pope’s representative came to town to announce the threat

and – as they always did in such cases – he started a big bonfire to burn my writings. So, all the students at the university joined right in, as though they were throwing more of my writings into the fire. What they were actually throwing into the fire were copies of the POPE's writings! That was rich!

NARRATOR: If you read Luther's writings from this period, he comes off as ... well, bull-headed and arrogant.

LUTHER: Hey!

NARRATOR: Well really! During his 60-day grace period, he wrote a public letter to the pope, supposedly to mend fences. But Luther couldn't keep himself from adopting a tone that was just guaranteed to send the pope right up the wall. He wrote to the pope as an equal – almost like a father instructing a wayward son – explaining that the pope just had his theology all wrong, and if he would just listen to Luther he would understand.

LUTHER: Well it's true! When the 60-day grace period was up and the pope sent a representative to excommunicate me, the very best thing happened. All the students and faculty from the university marched out to the place where they burned the clothes of plague victims, to stop the spread of disease. There they publicly and solemnly burned the constitutional foundations of medieval Europe – the books of canon law. Me, I just threw the papal writ of excommunication into the fire. If the pope wanted me to burn in hell, I could at least burn his letter!

NARRATOR: The excommunication supposedly decided what would happen to Luther's eternal soul, but there was still the question of earthly punishment, so there was another trial in 1521.

LUTHER: Wouldn't you know it! There was that Johannes Eck again! He presented me with copies of my own writings. He asked me if I stood by them. You could hear a pin drop in the room. It was the moment of reckoning for sure, and I could feel the threat of being burned at the stake. But I said what I had to say: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason..., I cannot and will not recant anything.... Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me."

NARRATOR: And there you have it: the climax of all that back and forth with the pope. "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason..., I cannot recant anything. Here I stand. I can do no other." With his life on the line, Luther managed to leave his arrogance aside for a moment and stand on his own integrity and the word of God. Talk about speaking truth to power!

LUTHER: *[bows and leaves]*

NARRATOR: "Here I stand. I can do no other."

After he made his dramatic stand, knowing he was condemning himself with his own words, the council declared him an outlaw and he was taken off toward prison. On the way out, however, he was kidnapped by his own prince and taken to protective custody in the castle, where he spent

the next few years translating the Bible into German, writing essays, and composing hymns, including the one we will sing in a moment, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” And all the while, the ideas he had set loose were running like wildfire throughout Europe.

Later, when it was safe, Luther actually led a happy life, no longer in despair. He was always aware that he was a sinner, but he was even more conscious of the grace of God.

He married and settled down to family life, and they say he was a lot of fun to drink beer with. He had a huge beer mug with three rings of writing on it. Near the top of the mug were the words to the Ten Commandments. In the middle of the mug was written the Apostle’s Creed. Right at the bottom of the mug was the Lord’s prayer. They say that while he was arguing theology with his drinking companions, he could get to the “amen” at the bottom of his mug before the others finished with the “Thou Shalt Nots” at the top.

So, today – 502 years later – we celebrate the persistence of the man who kept reading the Bible until he found the good news there, and the courage of the man who stood on the word of God and spoke truth to power even when his life and his soul were at stake. We celebrate the man who learned for himself – and for us – that salvation is not something to be earned or bought, but a free gift of God’s own grace.

And for this I say, “Thanks be to God!” AMEN