

## **Pounding of the Door**

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October 30, 2011

John 8: 31-36 and Romans 3: 19-28

(the sound of loud pounding)

The pounding that you just heard is not unlike the pounding that was heard 494 years ago, on the eve of All Saints' Day (a day we know as Halloween), in Wittenberg, Germany. On October 31, 1517, a young Roman Catholic Priest by the name of Martin Luther posted on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, a list of 95 theses, or statements, and requested a meeting of the church leaders to discuss and debate the substance of these 95 theses. At the time, Martin Luther had no idea what drastic changes this simple act would bring upon the church. Posting those 95 Theses began a chain reaction that resulted in the events that we know today as the Protestant Reformation.

St. Peter's United Church of Christ is part of the Reformed Tradition. Reformation Sunday, which we celebrate today is part of who we are as a church.

Who was Martin Luther? Recently the Arts and Entertainment Network listed who they considered to be the most influential people of the past millennium. They are:

1. Guttenberg, for his invention of the movable-type printing press that made books readily available and affordable for the first time.
2. Isaac Newton for his work in science, physics, and astronomy.
3. Martin Luther, who brought religion and education to the common people, and is credited for laying the foundation of democracy.

So, Martin Luther is a significant personality in our history. Who is he? What happened on that day 494 years ago when Luther posted the 95 Theses was simply the culmination of a long, personal struggle that had been fermenting within Luther's soul and spirit for several years.

Martin Luther grew up in a day and age when the church pictured God as an angry, vindictive God; a God of wrath and punishment who watched over us, anxiously waiting for us to make a mistake so that we could be punished with eternal suffering in hell. The church taught people to fear God in the worst sense of the word. And then the church used that fear to control the people, to get them to submit to church and obey all the teachings and rules of the church. The church used that fear to amass tremendous wealth and power for the Pope in Rome and for the Roman Catholic Church, which was the only church in Europe at the time. (Before I go any further, I want to emphasize that the Catholic Church of Luther's day, and the Catholic Church today are very, very different. Over the past 494

years, the Catholic Church has gone through its own reformation, so when I talk about the Church of Luther's day, I am in no way comparing it to the Roman Catholic Church of today. I think it's important that we understand that!)

Well, back to our story. As a young man, Luther decided early on that he did not want to spend all of eternity suffering in hell, so he set out to make himself right and pleasing before God. He left a promising future in law school and took on the disciplines of becoming an Augustinian monk. He continued his schooling and was ordained as a priest in the Church. Later, he earned his Ph.D. in Bible and Theology and eventually he became a professor at the University of Wittenberg in Germany, one of the new and upcoming schools of the Church.

But through all of this, Luther did not find what he wanted the most, what he longed for and searched for: peace with God and a sense of assurance and rest for his troubled spirit. It seemed no matter how hard he tried to be good and obedient to the commands of God and the Church, no matter how hard he strived to do everything that a Christian was supposed to do, he realized that he was still a sinner. And since he was taught that God punishes sinners, he could only see himself as condemned before God. He reasoned, "God is holy and just. I am a poor, miserable sinner, no matter how hard I try. How can a holy God possibly love a sinner like me?" In spite of doing everything the Church said a person should do to win the mercy and love and forgiveness of God, for Luther, it was all to no avail.

I suppose that Luther was simply more honest with himself than most of us are today. We tend to belittle and minimize our sins, as if they make no difference to God, as if God doesn't care. Luther saw his sin for what it really was - that which separated him from God. Now remember, throughout all of this personal struggle, Luther was not a basket case. On the contrary, he was developing quite a reputation for himself as being one of the budding stars of the Church...an extremely intelligent and gifted person and a great scholar and professor at the university. He was highly regarded and respected.

One day as Luther was preparing for a series of lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans, he was reading and studying chapter 3, a portion of Scripture that he had surely read many times before. But this time as he read it, his eyes were opened, the light came on! As Luther describes it, "It was as though the gates of heaven were opened to me!"

Let's hear again a portion of what Luther read (Romans 3:19-28):

"But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified (put right with God) by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus....

For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free!" Suddenly Luther knew the truth of the Gospel, and suddenly Luther was set free! He was set free from trying to make himself worthy and acceptable before God, something he could never achieve for himself, no matter how hard he tried. He was free to simply rest in the grace and favor and love of God, grace and forgiveness freely given to us because of what Jesus Christ accomplished for us on the cross of Calvary. Luther rediscovered the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. It had been there right in front of his eyes all along, but it had been hidden, covered by centuries of misuse and tradition in the Church.

This is the truth of that Gospel: We are not saved, we are not put right with God by being good or obeying the law or going through all the outward rituals of religion or anything else we may try to do to make ourselves worthy before God. No, we are saved solely by the love and grace of God freely and generously given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Salvation comes to us as a free gift of God's grace. All we have to do is respond to it. All we have to do is accept that gift in faith. Faith is simply saying, "Yes, Lord, I believe. Yes, Lord, I accept your gift of love and forgiveness and acceptance. Thank you, Lord, for loving and forgiving me."

With this new-found discovery of the Gospel, Luther was eager to share it with the world. He thought that he would find a ready audience, but instead he was met with resistance and persecution. The power structure of the Church could see that if this man were left alone to spread his teachings, they could end up losing their power and control over the people, along with great a great deal of wealth. And so the church leaders branded Luther as a heretic and outlaw and tried everything they possible could to suppress his teaching.

But the church was not able to squelch Martin Luther. He was the right man for the right time, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and armed with the truth of the Gospel and the Word of God.....and there is no greater power than that.

There are still many Christians today, who continue to struggle and wrestle with many of the same doubts and questions as did Luther so many years ago. What was lacking, what was missing in Luther's life, and what he discovered in the Scriptures, is the assurance of salvation, the certainty of the love and grace of God through Jesus Christ, the pure joy and thrill that comes in knowing, "I am a saved, loved, redeemed, child of God!" Luther discovered the true and radical nature of God's grace. There are many Christians today who continue to doubt and wonder

if they really are saved, who think that their salvation still depends on how good they are and how closely they obey the law and live by all the rules.

Now, I want to be clear. I'm not saying that God doesn't care how we live. Certainly God desires very deeply that we stay close to God and that we live lives of honesty, integrity, and obedience to God's will. But how we live doesn't save us. Jesus Christ saves us! That's the Gospel! That's the Good News that sets us free. We are saved by the grace of God through faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

It's nice to know something about Martin Luther and the history of the Reformation. But I hope that if you get anything from this sermon this morning you will leave this church with the knowledge and assurance and certainty that God loves you and that by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, you are forgiven and made a child of God. I implore you to leave here today truly knowing the joy of your salvation.

As Martin Luther read the Scriptures, he discovered the Gospel, and, as he put it, the "gates of heaven" opened to him. As children of the Reformation, I pray that we may know that same assurance of God's love and grace, and may heaven be opened for us!

Thanks be to God! Amen.