

Lectionary 26A 2017, Matthew 21:23-32, October 1, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Late in this month, on October 31, in the small city of Wittenberg, Germany, thousands will gather to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. In 1517 on that date, Martin Luther posted 95 Theses calling into question the sale of indulgences. Most Lutherans today don't even know what an indulgence is. All we know is that somehow they are a very bad thing. Bad enough that this young monk and professor of Biblical Studies at Wittenberg U protested. So that's the first thing I want to point out about Martin Luther and the Reformation. Luther was a protester. He was in the minority. He was called disloyal and disrespectful and lots of other names that can't appear in a family-friendly sermon. The larger movement he began known today as the Protestant Church has the word "protest" built into it: "protest-protestant."

During these next several weeks, leading up to the 500th anniversary, I hope to weave in some themes of Luther and the Reformation into these sermons.

Martin Marty, in his recently published book, "October 31, 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World," asks how a young monk, in a brand new university, in a small, backwater town in Germany, could touch such a nerve as to send all of Europe, and eventually the whole world, into upheaval?

The answer is right there, he says, in the first of the 95 Theses. Luther wrote: "When our Lord and Master Jesus says "Repent," he means that the whole life of a Christian should be repentance."

When people heard Luther say that they heard freedom. They heard acceptance. They heard love. That's the way Luther had come to hear the word as well. But it wasn't always the case for the young reformer.

Before this Luther heard the word "repent" and he shook in his shoes. "Unless you repent, by confessing all your sins, you will never know the love of God. You will always be destined for hell." That's what Luther heard when he heard "repent."

But then something started to happen in Luther's life. He began to study the Bible, especially in their original languages of Hebrew and Greek. The Bible speaks about repentance a lot. Our first reading and our gospel speak of repentance. More on those later. When he studied the Bible Luther discovered that repentance meant something much different than he previously thought. He heard God say, through these words, "I am your God. Jesus loves you and accepts you. I the Lord will always be your Lord. Your future belongs to me, and it's a future of love. I don't want anything to distract you from me. I want you to turn away from anything that causes you not to trust me and turn towards me and my love." You see, Luther started to hear words like "repentance," and "faith," and even "obedience" in light of God's mercy and love and acceptance in Jesus. Previously he heard them only in terms of what he had to do. He thought he had to do something and do it exactly right before God would love him and accept him. But once he began to hear God's love in Christ always comes first everything else he read about and studied in the Bible all fell into place.

Truth be told we have the same problem. Let me illustrate what I mean using my own experience as an example. You might have something similar in your own life.

I grew up in a home that went to church every Sunday, a Lutheran church. I listened to Lutheran sermons, sang lots of Lutheran hymns, prayed Lutheran prayers, studied for three years

in Lutheran confirmation classes. My Lutheran credentials were as good as anyone else's at the time.

In spite of my strong Lutheran upbringing I was nagged by an even stronger sense of doubt. When I heard someone ask, "Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" I didn't know what to say. I worried I hadn't accepted him. Maybe something important is missing? Or I would hear something like, "Have you been saved? Or, You need only to have faith." And I began to doubt the strength or the quantity of my faith. Was it strong enough that God would love me or accept me?

You see, we live in a religious culture that still puts a great deal of emphasis on what we need to do in order to have a right relationship with God. It's just that the words we use are different. We hear someone like Luther say, "faith alone saves us," and we worry if our faith is sincere enough or strong enough. It no longer is a word of freedom.

For me the breakthrough came when I heard someone say, "don't worry about your faith. When you worry about your faith you are thinking of yourself. Hear instead this promise that your future is in God's hands. Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead, accepts you. Your destiny belongs to him, no matter what you have been in the past. Your future, not yet even known to you, also belongs to him. This is God's certain and unconditional promise to you." When I heard that all my worries about the sincerity of my own faith, or whether or not I truly accepted Jesus as my savior, began to fade away.

We see the results of this promise come to fruition in our gospel reading today. Jesus points to the acceptance of prostitutes and tax-collectors ahead of the morally superior religious leaders as an example. They heard Jesus promise them a future that did not depend on their past. That's why Jesus says they are going into the kingdom ahead of everyone else. With Jesus they heard acceptance and promise and that brought freedom. Only when they heard that word of acceptance and freedom did they turn towards God. Only then did they "repent."

Luther came to see clearly that the promise always comes first, before we can do anything. When we hear the promise that Jesus loves us and accepts us and has a future for us, then we can turn away from other distractions, other worries, other doubts. Maybe even repenting of trying to turn our faith into something we can control. Luther is right, our whole lives can be about repentance, because our whole lives are already promised a future by Jesus who lives. Amen.