

October 22 2017

**Reading from the Bible** *Ephesians 2:1-10*

**Sermon**                   **“Reformation 500: So What?”**

The scripture this morning comes from the book of Ephesians chapter two in your pew Bible. You may want to follow along. St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was probably written to a number of churches. We might guess, the Ephesians’ church clerk was the best one for filing papers since we do not have copies of other churches’ letters. The book talks a lot about the church, the future of the church, how to be the church and faith of the church. This morning that is what our scripture is all about.

Ephesians 2-1-10

“You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

There are a lot of suggested stories at the beginning of this conversation about Reformation Sunday. I want to suggest that you have been found in the rip-tide of a river and you are drowning. As you are bobbing up and down you are screaming, “Help me, help me.” And suddenly someone, a strong and able-bodied person swims out against all odds and grabs you and pulls you to shore and you are alive. And, of course you say, “Thank you” but in the meantime up comes the beach patrol. And the beach patrol says, “This really did not happen, you have not been saved unless you read this statement, better yet read this paper, notarize it and come back and give it for us. And by the way you should pay this amount of money to the Beach Authority not to the person who saved you but the Beach Authority because you are so glad to be alive. And by the way you shouldn’t swim here because the sign says, “No swimming.”

The beginnings of the Reformation are a little bit like this because people in those days just didn't quite get what the issue was all about. There was a lot of stuff going in the Middle Ages. This is not to say anything against my wonderful and faithful Catholic friends, or against the Catholic priests I have known or nuns that I have known but this is all about times past during the Middle Ages. There was once a man named Martin Luther and he was supposed to become a lawyer. The story is, he had an adventure in a thunderstorm and he cried out, "God if you save me from this lightning, I will give my life to you." So instead of becoming a lawyer, he became a monk. As a monk, he was tortured in his mind and spirit trying to figure out how to be sure he was pleasing God. We all want to please God, we always wonder about God's will. But Martin was obsessed with finding God's will. As a catholic he had a confessor priest and he would daily make confession. Often he started out then door and then he would return and say, "I forgot to confess this and that. Martin would confess and confess until his confessor said, "Go home and come back when you have done something like murdering you mother or your dad and then you will have something to really confess." He did penitence which was a way for seeking forgiveness for sin. He was constantly praying and going on pilgrimages. He crawled on his hands and knees up rocks in some places and still never felt complete. He never ever felt complete. He fasted and he did everything he could that was subscribed by his culture and his church to please God. He studied, he read, he made sermons all to no avail.

There is a story, this my paraphrase –one kindly head of the monastery said to him, "Chill out, Luther" it was probably something a little more dignified than that but the priest said, "Rest, Martin. Rest quit seeking." Martin started studying the Bible. At that time the Bible was only in Latin and Latin was already a dead language for 1200 years or more. It was not used in daily life. Then in his Bible reading, Martin came across the Book of Romans and Paul's letters to the churches. He read," No person is saved by works." Paul also read, "By faith you are free and not by works. "The light goes on for Martin Luther and he became aware.

However, that was all fine and good but he was in the culture that was getting worse and worse. From about the 1200 to 1300 the idea about indulgences had come up. The idea was Christ saved us from sin for eternity but he didn't save us from the consequences of daily sins. God would still punish us, all of which was not entirely scriptural. And then maybe, the church decided there were other ways you could find to pay yourself out of that mess. Then the Catholic Church constructed something that is called purgatory. It is not in the Bible either. But these two handy ideas were great for making money for the Catholic Church. If anyone has been in St Peter's Basilica –it is an awesome building. The huge

building was paid for by people, many poor, poor people who were paying for their indulgences for their sins and for getting their families out of purgatory. So let's say your grandmother died—you don't know if she went to heaven or not and the priests doesn't know. The priests are going to tell you. "We just prayed for her and the sins she committed and now she will work her way out of purgatory more quickly and go right on into heaven". Purgatory was sort of a holding place between earth and heaven. The whole idea worked quite well because the people couldn't read and were very suspicious and superstitious. The clergy was often uneducated. All the services were all in Latin. It would be as if I came here and gave all the services in Spanish just maybe a few of you would understand it. However with my pronunciation I would guess most of you would not understand it. And so in those days some of the clergy just made up mumbo-jumbo words. At the same time the churches were charging for baptism, for funerals charging and for almost everything that they could. It was terrible taxation and manipulation of the people.

After Martin starts reading his Bible and praying more and more, he came up with his 95 thesis. These were in Latin and were mostly about indulgences and that as believers we do not need anyone between us and God.

This is how indulgences worked, let us say that you in the congregation are all saints in heaven. You have prayed for people. You have done lots of good works deeds and there are many priests and popes are included. You have this huge great treasury of good works to your credit. The church decided they could sell the treasury to people who are living on earth. They said to the poor living people, "If you don't have enough good works, good deeds, we (the church) will sell you indulgencies. When you buy indulgencies, we will cross off some of your sins. It got so bad, that people not only paid for daily sins to be forgiven but could pay for future sins to be forgiven. Whatever you might seek or need. What a system! None of the people could read the Bible; they trusted the church and the priest. So the church said, look-your money built this beautiful cathedral, you are happy and are going to heaven, and Aunt Agnes isn't in purgatory any more. The people knew it because the priests said it. There were actually peddlers who went from town to town and sold indulgencies. And guess who printed hundreds of thousands of indulgencies? - J. Gutenberg invented the printing press and printed thousands of indulgencies blank forms. The peddlers would go through towns and they would say—"As the coin in the copper sings, the souls in purgatory springs!"--- Very clever. People would put money in believing with all their heart that this is what they needed to do.

The principal of limbo was invented about that time, too. If people who didn't have their baby baptized because maybe a priest wasn't around, they were told

their baby was in limbo. And they were told if your baby wasn't baptized that it could be a flying around like a firefly.

It took Martin 10 years to write about his faith and finally nail his thesis to the church door. Then he was chased off and was excommunicated. Now if someone had nailed something to the door of the church where I grew up, they would end up paying a lot. Martin's thesis was talking points. He really wanted to talk about what he believed was in the Bible and that the Catholic Church was on the wrong track, and there needed to be changes. There needed to be some reform. His debating points were mostly about indulgences. He wanted the church to get back to the Bible.

However the Catholic Church at that time was not into reformation. Eventually Martin Luther leaves the monastery, he ends up marrying a nun and she leaves her convent. He writes the book. Table Talk about witty things said around the table. He changes his thinking about faith, works and the church. Unfortunately later in life, he wrote a terrible, awful book about the Jews. Many feel his thinking became very twisted for some reason. I am not sure what happened to him at that time.

You might wonder why we are talking about the reformation. We are the United Church of Christ. We, like the Lutheran church, have retained the Reformation, We are reformed. As a church, we have congregational and Christian Church grandparents. We all claim what the Bible says about faith and works. Martin Luther finally believed that by faith he was saved. And that gave him peace of mind. Forgiveness is a gift, a gift that can't be won by works and it can't be bought. Martin knew that he never would have enough faith. He could never be holy enough and that was/is Ok. I know there are people and maybe you know, too, that feel they can never be good enough to be a Christian. There are some who believe, they have done something so bad that God can never forgive them. I knew a man who should have been convicted of man-slaughter- he shot a man and no amount of conversation could convince him. He said he had confessed his sin to God. He was sorry. He was repentant but he could never grasp that he had been forgiven by God. I don't think any of you have gotten to that place but you know there are things in all of your past that crops up from time to time. We say, "I can't believe I said that-I can't believe I did that. How can I be a person of God?" It is written in Ephesian, "God is rich in mercy and out of his great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses, he made us alive." That is the message of every reformed church, in every Christian church. We are all going to meet people and maybe you know some who don't believe they are good enough to be Christian. Alas, there are Protestant Churches that have lists of dos and don'ts. I know in the Korean church all the elders stand up in front and say exactly how much they have pledged. They are required to that and that is a huge figure.

To be a faithful Christians- We don't need an intermediary, we don't need judges, extra requirements, or to be manipulated to know the love and forgiveness of God. All Jesus wants the is very smallest steps toward God. All we need to know is that by faith we are saved.

If you interested in Martin Luther's 95 theses in Latin, Chris has them on file in the office or you can go online. 85 of them are about the indulgences.

Let us pray

Great God in Heaven we make things so complicated you must shake your head in amazement in the ways that we try to make people find you. When indeed all we have to do is to have faith in you and you do the rest. May we be conduits of your grace, may we be examples of faith, and may the good works be abundant to your glory drawing people to you and serving people in your need. We thank you for great people, all the Reformers, the Martin Lutherans, the Calvins and all the others that stood up to principalities. Some died. We thank you that even in our day we find the truth only in the Holy Bible, holy faith. Amen.