

“The Word of God Brings Reformation”

Romans 3:19-28

This Reformation Day marks the 499th year since Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenburg Church. Next year, of course, there will be a lot more talk. You might even hear about it outside of church. The 500th anniversary of this event might even garner some attention from the secular world – but I won't hold my breath. And if the secular world does give attention to Luther, my guess is that he will be portrayed as a defiant rebel rather than a scholar and pastor who was seeking the truth found in the Word of God.

This event of the posting of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517 AD, these 95 statements that Luther wanted to debate concerning the sale of indulgences, is said to be the event that was the beginning of the Reformation of the Church. I understand that from an historical perspective, it was the first public event of Luther's career that called into question the teachings of the Roman church – but you have to understand that Luther didn't intend for it to be so public.

He wrote the 95 Theses in Latin. He desired for a debate with John Tetzel, who was the chief salesman of indulgences – these pieces of paper which, for a price, you could purchase and have all your sins forgiven. You didn't even need to confess your sins or even be absolved. You didn't need the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament. You didn't need

Jesus. You just needed a silver coin. You didn't even need 30 silver coins – just one would do.

Of course, students of Luther translate the 95 Theses into German and those who own the printing presses are more than happy to share it with the world. But I will argue that the posting of the 95 Theses is not the beginning of the Reformation of the Church. It is not even the beginning of Luther's part in the reformation.

God has always worked through His Word. He doesn't work through clever arguments or well-crafted points of debate. His Word and His Word alone has changed the world. If you want to know where the Reformation began, we need look no farther than our Epistle reading for today.

In the year 1515, while preparing for a lecture on Paul's letter to the Romans which he would present at the University of Wittenburg, where he taught, Luther was troubled by Paul's words: "We know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law."

It was that last line in particular that troubled Luther. He had been taught that God is righteous and we are sinners who are held accountable to God. And the Roman church was teaching that Jesus' death and resurrection offered the potential for salvation, but you needed to acquire that through works of penance: doing certain works, saying Our Fathers, saying Hail Mary's, buying indulgences."

And Luther was angry at this “righteous” God who seemingly couldn’t wait to get His hands on sinners and torment them with the fires of judgment. A year before he died, Luther wrote about that time of his life and said that he “hated that righteous God, if not with outright blasphemy, at least with great murmuring.”

But God, being merciful, opened Luther’s eyes to the meaning of the Word of the Gospel Paul was proclaiming. This righteousness of God is manifested, is revealed to us by which He makes us righteous apart from the works of the Law. Luther wrote that when he came to understand this, it was as if the gates of heaven had been opened to him and for the first time in his life, he believed that the forgiveness of sin and salvation won on the cross of Jesus Christ was for him.

The Word of God changed this man who, by his own admission, was filled with anger and hate for God; the Word of God changed him into a champion for the Gospel. I often wonder what he felt like that day. Up until that day, he had never known what it was like to live under God’s grace. Now, he had been a faithful son of the church all his days; he had gone to church every Sunday.

However, until that day when God revealed His righteousness and mercy and grace to him through the Word of God, Martin Luther had lived his entire life in fear of judgment. Luther understood what a great weight, what a great burden, sin is. He took it very seriously and desired more than anything to be a faithful child of a loving God. Up until that point when “the gates of heaven opened to him” as he truly heard the Gospel for the first time, up until that time, he had not known the living all-powerful God to also be a God who loved him and cared for him.

When he finally understood that he can stand before the judgment throne of God justified, not held accountable for any sin, clothed in the righteousness of Christ because Christ took all of the guilt of his sin to the cross and grave – when he finally understood what these words meant, it was the difference between heaven and hell, life and death, love and hatred.

The Word of God changed Luther. Through the preaching and teaching of Luther, the Word of God changed the world. There is an old saying, “The church is always in need of reform.” When we see abuses within the church, when we see corruption of the good in our world, in our nation, in our city, in our homes – it is the hearing of the Word of God that will bring positive change. It is in Scripture and nowhere else that God permits Himself to be found.

Search the Scriptures. The righteousness of God has been manifested, is has been revealed to you. Reformation happens when the Word of God is revealed. The church, which is always in need of reform, is always needing the Word of God to be proclaimed in its truth and purity. You and me, we are always in need of reform, we are always needing the Word of God to be held before our eyes and proclaimed in our ears in its truth and purity.

You have been brought out of hate into love, out of death into life, and out of the judgment of hell to the promise of heaven. It is as if the gates of heaven have been opened to you because, through the Word of God, the righteousness of God has been revealed. Amen.