



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

**A Life Transformed by Faith
Romans 1:16-17**

Our text for today is Romans 1:16-17. Hear the word:

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.””

Each year, on the final Sunday of October the church celebrates Reformation Sunday. The reason is that it was on October 31, 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the chapel door at Wittenberg Castle. It is particularly significant this year because Tuesday is the 500th anniversary.

It would be wrong to say that the nailing of Luther’s 95 Theses marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. The tinder was already in place, but Luther provided the spark. Or when someone said to the humanist Erasmus that he laid the egg which hatched Luther, Erasmus said, “Yes, but I laid a hen’s egg, and Luther hatched a game cock.”

No one noticed when Luther tacked his 95 theses to the chapel door; the document was not discovered until the next day. Someone unknown person took the theses down and translated them from Latin into German, then printed them and sent copies throughout Germany. Luther did not intend to have the theses translated and printed. What he was doing was a common practice in the academic world to call for a debate.

To give some context to Luther, he was born in 1483. Eight years later in England, Henry VIII was born, and when Luther was 9, Columbus set sail for Asia not knowing that two continents were in his way.

During his life, Luther had two conversion experiences, and to understand them we need to know a little about what Luther was taught by the church of his day.

A person received saving grace through the Sacrament of Baptism, which offered forgiveness of original sin. A newly baptized child or an adult found themselves in a state of grace. The problem is, though original sin is washed away, we continue to sin and in our sins mound up a debt. The acquisition of heaven at death was a simple mathematical formula. If your debt was greater than your merit then you went to Purgatory until all the debt was paid, and Purgatory was a horrible torturous place. If your merit exceeded your debt, you went straight to heaven, and your so-called extra merit could be used to help pay some other person’s debt. These folks whose merit exceeded their debt were called saints.

The problem then is how to earn merit to equal your debt. Luther was taught that he should confess his sin to an ordained priest who would then offer absolution and give him penance to perform. Of course, most people could remember all their sins in the confessional, and many never had the time to do their penance. So there were other ways to gain merit; one was to visit holy places and see the relics of the saints and maybe you could add to your account some of their extra credit or merits. At times the church would sell indulgences and to purchase an indulgence was a good work, for your money could support the monks and priests who could do good works for your account. The sale of indulgences was common. The primary way to gain merit was through the seven Sacraments. Five of these Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Confession and Extreme Unction (or Last Rites) were required. The sacraments of Marriage and Ordination were not required of everyone.

This system of salvation that sounds so foreign to Presbyterians was basically what Luther believed in his early years. I do not know how serious Luther was about his religious practices. Maybe, like many young men, he did not have much of a sense of mortality and basically went through the motions, but all this changed on July 2, 1505, when Luther experienced his first conversion.

Luther was in law school at the University of Erfurt. On that evening he was traveling from his home to Erfurt and was caught in a storm. A lightning bolt struck so close that he was thrown off his horse and tradition tells us that he cried out, "Help me St. Anne, and I will become a monk!" This was an ominous moment for Luther. Why would God be throwing bolts of lightning at him? He must have done something terribly wrong to anger God.

Luther was unhurt, but unlike some of us, who make promises during terrifying times, Luther kept his promise. He knew he had to get right with God so he resigned from law school and entered the monastery. You can imagine his father Hans Luther was not overly excited about young Martin's decision, especially after the sacrifices he made to send his son to law school.

Two years after he entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, Luther was ordained to the priesthood. This was an occasion when Hans Luther had a reason to be proud of his son. The whole family came to the cathedral for Luther's consecration to the priesthood. During this service Luther officiated at the mass for the first time.

While all of the relatives were seated, Martin Luther stood before the assembled crowd and with perfection went through the elements of the Mass until he came to the part where the priest utters the words of consecration. We must remember that in the Roman Catholic tradition at the moment of the prayer of consecration, the miracle of transubstantiation takes place. That is, in the Catholic Church, the ordinary elements of bread and wine miraculously change into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ.

When Martin Luther came to that high holy moment, when for the first time as a priest he would give the words of consecration, he opened his mouth and nothing came out. There was a dreadful silence, worshippers were trying to pull the words from Luther's lips, but he just stood there flushed. His lips began to tremble, and finally he said some words that were virtually inaudible. Then in a clumsy manner he went on to finish the liturgy.

When Martin Luther was asked afterward what happened, he said, “When I realized I was about to hold the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ in my hands – in these hands, these mortal hands, these filthy hands – I was too terrified to continue.”

Luther recognized as never before his unworthiness. Luther knew himself to be “dust and ashes and full of sin.” Roland Bainton in his book, *Here I Stand*, wrote, concerning Luther, “Creatureliness and imperfection alike oppressed him. Toward God he was at once attracted and repelled. Only in harmony with the ultimate could he find peace. But how could a transgressor confront divine Holiness?”

This then became Luther’s quest, to find holiness and peace. But how can anyone attain holiness? Or in the system of that day, how could anyone produce enough merit to overcome their demerits? Luther tried everything. He tried strict monasticism, but it did not work. On one occasion he said, “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his “monkery” it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.”

Luther traveled to Rome, a place filled with relics of the saints. But he left Rome disillusioned.

Luther entered the confessional and it would take him hours to confess his sins. His father confessor realized that Martin Luther was in spiritual torment. For Luther tried everything, even flagellation. He punished himself. He denied himself. But he said, “All I see is Christ, the angry judge, standing there ready to cast me into hell at any moment!” And that terrified him.

“You ask me if I love God? Love God? Sometimes I hate God!”

Luther opened the Bible and read the Word of God: “Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength and all of your mind.” This is the great commandment.” And Luther would say, “Let me be honest. I haven’t loved God with all my heart, or with all my mind for five minutes. And if loving God this way is the great commandment then I have transgressed by not loving God as I should, and it would seem that failure to obey the great commandment would be the great transgression for which he should receive the greatest of punishment in hell.

We don’t think this way. We might say, “Yes, we know the great commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and all that business, but to err is human. Nobody is perfect. Who in the world does it? I don’t do it, you don’t do it, nobody does it. So why sweat it? God’s going to grade on a curve, isn’t he?”

R. C. Sproul wrote, “Luther would hear somebody say, ‘Everyone is entitled to one mistake,’ and Luther would say, ‘Wait a minute. God says, ‘You shall be holy as I am holy.’ How many mistakes does God make? The Bible doesn’t say we are entitled to one mistake. And even if it did, how long ago did you use yours up?”

Luther wrestled with the ultimate question: How can an unjust, sinful people ever hope to stand in the presence of a just and holy God? He had a problem and so do we.

One night in the monastery, Dr. Luther was preparing his lecture for his class at the University of Wittenberg on the Book of Romans. He was reading the passage we read earlier from Romans 1:16-17, and he had his second conversion experience. Luther read, “**For in it (*the gospel*) the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.**” Luther later wrote, “Suddenly the light dawned on me that the righteousness of God that Paul is talking about is not the righteousness by which God himself is righteous and by which we are judged, but Paul writes about the righteousness of Christ that God grants freely to his unrighteous children who will embrace it and trust it and believe it.”

Luther went on to read, “**The just shall live by faith,**” and he said, “As I understood it, I realized that my salvation, my justification, does not depend ultimately upon my performance, on my righteousness, but it is graciously given to me by the righteousness of Jesus. He is my righteousness. He is the cloak. He covers my nakedness. When I understood it, and the light of the gospel came into my soul. The gates of paradise opened, and I walked through! The just shall live by faith. I am not righteous, but Christ is, and by faith I cling to the righteousness of Christ as the gift of God.”

Living in a monastery will not make us right. Vigils, prayer and fasting will not make us right. Climbing the church stairs on our knees will not make us right. Trying to live at peace with others will not make us right. Teaching in Sunday school or singing in the choir will not make us right. Tithing will not make us right. Only Jesus, only Jesus, will make us right. To be righteous one must trust in Jesus Christ, by making him Lord of their life. What we do in response to God’s free gift in Christ, the vigils, the prayers, teaching Sunday school, worship, our morality, our service, our mission, all these are our offerings of gratitude, not works of salvation.

Two years later in 1517 the Archbishop of Mainz and the Pope both needed money. The archbishop needed money to pay the debt he incurred purchasing his position, and the Pope needed money to continue the building of St. Peter’s Church in Rome. At the time no one knew of their scheme, but they recruited [Johann Tetzel](#) to go to Germany to sell indulgences. Money from the sale would be split between the Archbishop who was in debt and the Pope who was trying to build St. Peter’s. These indulgences not only provided absolution for all the sins one had not confessed, but also offered to take the place of penance owed for previous sins. It was also understood during this time that an indulgence could be purchased for those already in Purgatory.

There were many churches who thought Tetzel was a joke and would not allow him to enter, and some districts where a ruler like Frederick III of Saxony would not allow Tetzel to enter. But when Tetzel entered a church, if the church would have nothing to do with him, he would set up a crucifix on the square and start his preaching.

Tetzel was good at two things: scaring the daylights out of people and using slogans. He would preach about how your mother or uncle was screaming in great pain in Purgatory and all you needed to do to relieve their pain and gain their entrance in to heaven was to purchase an indulgence. He often said, “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings a soul from Purgatory springs.” It was a lucrative business.

Of course, Luther, with new understanding of the gospel, was incensed at this practice, and on October 31, 1517 he called for a debate by nailing his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg. Well, most folks in Wittenberg agreed with Luther and no one took up his challenge.

The document was taken down, translated into German and printed for all to read. Luther did not know why there was such a stir. He was simply using the means of the time to ask for a simple debate. A month earlier he posted 97 Theses which were more radical than the 95 and it did not cause a problem. In the 95 Theses he took a stand against the unpopular sale of indulgences, but he also wanted to defend the honor of the Pope for having people like Tetzel in the church.

But what Luther did not know at the time was the Pope was behind the sale of indulgences. Pressure was brought upon Luther, and knowing he was in trouble Luther wrote a letter of apology to the Archbishop of Mainz. He basically said, "Well, I may have overstated the case, and could have been less offensive." The Archbishop forwarded the letter to the Pope.

On [June 15, 1520](#), Pope Leo X warned Luther with a [Papal Bull](#), or edict, that he risked [excommunication](#) unless he recanted his writings, including the [95 Theses](#), and Luther must do so in 60 days. What marked Luther's break with Rome was taking the Papal Bull to the center of town and publically burning it. A month later Luther received another Papal Bull declaring his excommunication.

The case for excommunication was handed over to the state, for it was the state that burned heretics. Luther was ordered to appear before the [Diet of Worms](#) and be tried before the [Emperor Charles V](#). Prince [Frederick III, Elector of Saxony](#), obtained an agreement that Luther would be promised safe passage to and from the meeting.

Johann Eck, speaking on behalf of the Empire, presented Luther with a table laid out with copies of his writings and asked him if the books were his, and whether he stood by their contents.

Luther confirmed he was the author, but requested time to think about his answer as to whether he stood by its contents. He knew he was making a life or death decision. He prayed, consulted friends, and gave his famous response the next day: "Unless I shall be convinced by the testimonies of Scripture or by clear reason ... I neither can nor will make any retraction, since it is neither safe nor honorable to act against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

Luther was declared an [outlaw](#), his books were banned. He was allowed safe passage and left Worms, but he was to be captured when he returned home and be punished as a notorious heretic. The edict also made it a crime for anyone in Germany to give Luther food or shelter. It permitted anyone to kill Luther without legal consequence.

On his way home Frederick arranged for Luther to be kidnapped. He sent his knights to capture Luther and take him to a safe place and tell no one, not even Frederick, where he was. So when officials asked Frederick where Luther was, he could honestly say, "I don't know."

Luther was taken to Wartburg Castle, where he spent most of his time writing. He wrote tracts that have become the basis of Protestantism. He wrote about Justification by Faith, the sole authority of Scripture, the priesthood of all believers, the two Sacraments. He emphasized with the Apostle Paul who wrote in Galatians that our freedom in Christ is not to be abused. It is so easy to take forgiveness lightly and forget our responsibility to live to God's glory.

Well, that is part of the Martin Luther story. It is a story of a reformation that Luther never intended, but it happened because the church was in need of reform, and it was ready for reform.

In the 1530's, some twenty years before Luther died, a young French lawyer began to read the works of Luther. His name was John Calvin. I am certainly not going to tell you his story today, but Calvin ended up in Geneva where he took part in a more radical reformation.

From Calvin came the tradition that gave birth to the Presbyterian Church. It is the Reformed Tradition. It is a little different from Lutheran and Anglican and Methodist. It is a tradition that has taken on the motto, "Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda! ... The Church reformed and always being reformed by God's word and Spirit.

People, the church is still imperfect. It has not arrived and will not arrive at its destination until Jesus comes. Reformed churches recognize this and thus we constantly seek God's guidance. I know, I know, we all want the church we grew up in, but when God is at work in the church we are changed by God. Sometimes we listen and move forward and sometimes we take steps in the wrong direction.

The church is much different than the church Luther and Calvin and others at that time protested against. But still, I grew up in a church that would not ordain women. I grew up in a church that did not welcome people of color. I grew up in a church that taught me that God created the heavens and the earth and all that is contained in them in six 24 hour days. But God did not let us stay where we were. God continued to move in the church, reforming the church by his Word and Spirit, and today we recognize the gifts of women. We recognize that in the Bible there were leaders who were men and women. The worship hour is still the most segregated hour of the week, but God is moving to remind us that God welcomes all who come to Christ. The church is embracing scientific advancements as a gift to learn more about God's glorious creation rather than something we are in competition with.

So the question I have to ask on this Reformation Sunday: Is God still at work? Is God still at work in the Church? Is God still at work in your life? And if God is still at work, are we open to the movement of God's spirit as we are led to the truths revealed in his word and through God's Spirit? Amen.