

## **THE LEGACIES OF MARTIN LUTHER:**

### **1) JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE**

Romans 5: 1-11; Luke 18:9-14

[Prayer]

Martin Luther was the founding father of Protestantism five hundred years ago. Without him, I suppose we would all be Roman Catholics – we'd all be at mass down at Holy Rosary this morning.

But actually, everything would be different. Probably you and I would not even be here, because Protestantism has been so basic to our social history, and also our personal family histories.

Luther was a Catholic priest and monk in north/east Germany, 16<sup>th</sup> century.

First, why was a Reformation necessary? What was the situation in the church of the time? To understand Luther's huge impact, we might try to see him through the eyes of an ordinary peasant of that time. Let's imagine a German Catholic peasant around 1500 – just about 500 years ago.

Let's call him Johann. Johann is much like our own ancestors of that time if they lived in England, Scotland, or Netherlands or Germany, or wherever else in western Europe.

Johann is about 35 years old, an agricultural labourer near the town of Wittenberg. He works hard everyday on the land, to make a living for himself, and his wife and five children. He's subject to the authority of his overlord.

He's illiterate, but hopes someday he may learn to read. And he's a Christian and a Catholic like everyone else in that part of the world (except for a small minority of Jewish people).

Johann tries to live a decent life. But he knows he's a sinner. Sometimes he cheats or lies a little; sometimes he's quarrelsome with fellow workers. He knows he wasn't very generous or helpful when his neighbour's house burned down last year. He feels a bit guilty about that.

And, he lusts after his neighbour's wife, and sometimes he fools around with her a little. Sometimes he beats his wife a little too harshly. Then he feels bad about it.

It's the universal human condition.

We all know that we fail. We do or say things we shouldn't. We fail to do the good things that we could do. We tend to be rather indifferent to the suffering of others. Our compassion is very limited.

Sometimes we may feel guilty about our luxuries, our self-indulgence.

And we're all implicated in the sins of society – the social injustice, the abuse of the environment, and so on.

In these ways, Johann is rather like us. Or, we are rather like him.

Now the local priest tells Johann that he is in danger of hell fire. “God is angry with you, Johann! Your sins must be forgiven and absolved,” the priest says, “or, when you die, your immortal soul will find itself in the agony of hell fire.”

The priest tells him that, if he has mortal sins, unconfessed and unabsolved, his punishment, in utter agony, will go on forever and ever, with no hope of reprieve.

But if he's only a little bit bad, he will go instead to purgatory, an intermediate place of purging, where he may be punished, for many centuries, before he's allowed to move on to heaven.

But, the priest tells Johann, “You can escape hell, or reduce your time in purgatory, if you receive God's grace, through the church.”

“The church can obtain God's forgiveness for you, Johann, if you receive the mass (the holy communion) every week,

if you confess all your sins to the priest and obtain absolution, and if you receive the last rites from a priest before you die; you may actually go straight to heaven. Or, receive a reduced sentence in purgatory.”

“And there are other things you can do to improve your chances in the afterlife. You can view relics which the church possesses, such as, a splinter of the true cross of Jesus, or a thorn from Jesus' crown of thorns, or a bit of hair from the apostle Peter.

If you pay some money, and view the relics, you may receive remission of even centuries off purgatory!

So, Johann lived in fear, and, rather resentfully, did what the priest told him to do.

Now one day a new preacher came to town. His name was Tetzl, a representative of the pope in Rome. He announced a special dispensation from the pope, namely he was selling ‘indulgences’.

What's an indulgence? Tetzel declared that, if you pay a little money, you will receive a very special piece of paper, an indulgence, which declares officially, that not only your punishment, but the punishment of your deceased parents, can be relieved.

“Think of your poor mother and father, languishing in the fires of purgatory. Consider all that they did for you. You can get them out of there immediately if only you purchase an indulgence.”

In fact, said Tetzel, “When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

Well, Johann wasn't stupid; he was a little suspicious of this. But, this man was from the pope. He wore a richly embroidered silken robe. He spoke in a magnificent church building. Surely, he can't be all wrong.

So, just in case, Johann lined up with the others, and brought forth the required coin from his pocket, and dropped it into Tetzel's special box. When he heard the coin ring in the coffer, he rejoiced to think that his dear parents had now, finally, gone to heaven.

He felt so much better.

But then along came Martin Luther. Priest and monk. Professor of the Bible in the local Wittenberg University.

He knew that the preaching of indulgences was nonsense. He knew that the pope was merely raising money to build himself the glorious Basilica of St. Peter, and, to support his own luxurious lifestyle.

Luther was furious that the common people were being deceived and exploited in this way.

He sometimes preached at mass at the local church; but he was different from the other priests.

He told the people, that God wasn't interested in getting their money, that what God wanted was true faith and repentance.

He based his teaching in the Bible. The Bible taught that what God wanted was justice, kindness, faithfulness and love.

He told the people that their Creator loved them and would forgive them freely, without payment.

That in fact, God was in Christ; that God himself had suffered when Jesus died on the cross for them, showing how much God loved them.

Luther preached to them that we are justified by grace alone –

That means that they were forgiven, and counted as though they were perfectly just and righteous, not because of their own goodness – which is never good enough – but solely because of God’s love, which is utterly free.

This is what ‘grace’ means. The free, unmerited love of God.

We receive this grace by faith, and faith alone, said Luther.

Not by viewing relics – at any rate, he said, the relics are fakes! They do absolutely nothing for your relationship with God!

The indulgences too are nothing. The piece of paper they sell you is worthless.

Not even moral good works will earn you God’s grace!

By our own righteousness we will never earn our way into God’s good books. Rather, God’s freely given love, which we see in the cross of Christ, counts us as righteous. We are saved by sheer love and mercy.

So we don’t live by confidence in our own goodness. Rather, “the just shall live by faith.”

Luther reminded them of Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Remember the Pharisee? He told God how good he was: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues and adulterers... I fast, I give a tenth of my income....” and so on.

The Pharisee believed that he was perfectly OK, spiritually. He needed no forgiveness.

But, the humble tax collector, who knew his own failings, would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast, and only asked for God’s mercy. It was he, and not the Pharisee, who went down to his house “justified.” So said Jesus.

This, then, is the meaning of “justification” by grace through faith. You need only trust in God’s grace, and be at peace with God.

Now when Tetzl came to town, deceiving and exploiting the poor people of his parish, Luther went into action.

He was so angry he devised “95 Theses,” that is, ninety-five statements, or arguments, and sent them to his archbishop, but also nailed them up, publicly, on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg.

That was October 31, 1517.

He wrote the 95 theses, not to break up the church, not to start a new church, but only to challenge the leaders of the Catholic Church to debate, with an eye to reform.

Luther was motivated by a love of the people, especially the poor people of his town. This is evident in the tone of the 95 theses:

Let me read a few of Luther’s words:

Thesis # 50: “Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep.”

Or, thesis #86: “Why does the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?”

Can you imagine how inflammatory such passionate words would be when they hit the press?

Now, the 95 theses were written in Latin, but they were soon translated into German, and spread far and wide.

This was the age of the printing press (the new social media of the time). So a document of this kind could be run off by the thousands and circulated widely all over Germany.

Luther also wrote small pamphlets, vividly and eloquently written in German, richly illustrated by an artist, attacking the corrupt practices of the church. These too were circulated all over the continent.

His arguments eventually spread beyond Germany to Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, England, Scotland. Soon, Martin Luther was the most famous man in Europe. And the Protestant Reformation had begun.

Now, our friend Johann could not read Latin, or even German. But he heard the buzz.

Johann had heard how Luther had stood before the pope and the emperor and refused to recant his teachings. Knowing that he was now in danger of execution Luther declared: “Here I stand! I cannot do otherwise! God help me!”

Johann knew that the pope had excommunicated Luther – thrown him out of the church! He heard how the pope and the emperor together sought to capture him and burn him alive at the stake, how he had been held in hiding in a castle for a year.

We might imagine our friend Johann meeting the famous Dr. Luther on the street in Wittenberg, soon after he returned from hiding.

“Dr. Luther,” he asked, “Are you saying that no matter how bad we are, what we do or don’t do, that God still loves us and gives us his grace freely, for nothing?”

“Yes,” said Luther, “that’s what I say. That’s what the Bible teaches. Do you think that’s so hard to believe, Johann? Don’t you love your own children?”

“Oh yes, I love my children dearly.”

“Don’t you still love them when they’re naughty, don’t you forgive them everyday?”

“Yes,” Johann laughed. “Everyday they are naughty, and sometimes I beat them, but I love them nevertheless.”

“Is there anything they could do that would cause you to hate them?”

“Nothing,” said Johann. “No matter what my children did, I would still love and forgive them.”

“Well, then,” said Martin, “you are God’s child, made in God’s own image. Your Creator is delighted with you. Nothing you do can change God’s love for you. You are justified by grace alone, through faith.”

“Faith?” says Johann. “Does that mean that I just have to believe the right things? God rewards me just for believing things? Is believing things the good work I have to do?”

“Ah, no,” says Luther, “faith is just trusting and receiving with empty hands. And it is certainly more than just believing things.

“To believe in Jesus,” Luther said, “includes following him, believing in his way of life. It means believing in love and justice and peace. If you have faith in Jesus, more and more you will follow the way of love, as his disciple.”

“But what if I fail?” says Johann. “What if I don’t live in the way of love all the time?”

“Yes, Johann, you will fail, as we all do. But God forgives us every day, just as you forgive your own children, and we all forgive each other, every day. First, you are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, and then the good works will follow.”

“You see, Johann, we don’t do deeds of kindness for the sake of getting a reward, or escaping a punishment. No, we live in love because we have been loved, and we find joy in loving.”

Well, for this radical teaching, Luther was in big trouble, and lived for several years under the fear of execution by burning.

But he was protected by his prince, Frederick of Saxony. So the pope never managed to have him killed; he survived right up into his 60’s; he led what gradually developed as the Lutheran Church, and finally died a natural death.

Other reformers took their lead from Luther, but developed their theologies a little differently: the Baptists and Mennonites, the Reformed and Presbyterians, the Anglicans, and so on. Later, Methodists and United, and Evangelicals and Pentecostals.

We call them all Protestants – protesters. All have taken their lead from Martin Luther.

Now besides the teaching on Justification, there were certain other teachings of Luther which all the Protestants found powerful and liberating. I can mention just two of these very briefly.

First, Luther, and all the reformers, taught the ‘priesthood of all believers.’

As you know, we Protestants do not refer to our preachers and pastors as priests. I am not a priest, but simply a minister; minister means ‘servant’ – we are servants of God and the people.

But a priest, you see, is a go-between, a channel, a pipeline between God and the people. This belief gave the priest great power over the people. He could give or withhold the forgiveness of sins. Through the sacraments he got you into heaven!

But now Luther said: We don’t need a special class of priests; we can pray to God directly. Besides that, all Christians are priests because all of us are called to be channels of God’s grace to each other.

The priesthood of all believers meant that Christians are all equal, and there is no special caste of holy people, who have spiritual power over the others.

Preachers and pastors, Luther said, teach and lead the people, but do not have spiritual power to give or withhold God's grace.

That's why we don't go to confession and tell our sins to the priest, who then absolves us. Nor do we need the last rite of holy anointing by the priest, when we are dying, to get into heaven.

You see, in this way, Luther's reformation broke the power of the priests, and empowered the laity. Lay people, as you know, have a lot of authority in a Protestant church.

Further, it made no sense anymore that the pastors and preachers had to be unmarried.

Luther and everybody else knew the priests did not keep their vow of celibacy very well. There were so many fatherless offspring running around town – often they were the children of the priest's housekeeper.

Luther said it is unnatural to require ministers of the church to be celibate. No, he said, to put a priest and a female housekeeper together in one house, is like putting straw and fire together, and expecting no blaze to result.

So Luther himself eventually married a liberated nun, named Katherine; Martin and Katie had a long and wonderful marriage. Katie and Luther brought forth five children.

Now a second teaching about which all the Protestants agreed, was the primacy of scripture, the Bible.

It was, after all, the teaching of the Bible that had liberated them from the corrupt teaching of the Catholic Church as it was at that time.

Luther had argued that we hear the Word of God from scripture. The scripture is the earliest tradition, taking us back as closely as possible to Jesus himself and the apostles. So he used the Bible to criticize the false teachings that were now being used to oppress the people.

The primacy of the pope was no longer recognized, because obviously he had been wrong about indulgences, and many other things. The Bible now became the primary authority for all Protestants.



That's why Luther translated the Bible into German, the common tongue of the people. That's why he wanted all the lay people to learn to read, so that they could read the scripture for themselves.

This desire to read the Bible for themselves became a huge impetus for universal education. Luther even set up schools, for boys – and girls! – to learn to read.

So our friend Johann and his wife and children, all finally got the chance to learn to read.

How did it all work out for Johann? Well, he became a strong supporter of Luther, a stalwart Lutheran layman.

He felt liberated. He was grateful for the free love of God which was poured out upon him. He no longer feared God, but rather, found he was able to love God.

He was no longer worried about suffering forever and ever in hell. Rather, he rejoiced in his hope of “sharing the glory of God.”

Now he was not so angry. He gave up beating his wife, was kinder to his children, and his neighbours.

Of course he abandoned relics and indulgences, and laughed at them.

He no longer did good works to win a reward, or to avoid punishment. Now his kindness and generosity, his good works toward his neighbours, flowed spontaneously out of genuine love from the heart.

Now, Luther was a genuine hero, but he had his flaws. Also, no doubt, five hundred years later, we would disagree with Luther about many things. Theology and faith changes a good deal in 500 years.

But I suggest to you that Justification by grace alone through faith alone was basic and central to the Reformation movement – and is still valid and central for us today.

We are moved to live in love and justice not to win a reward in the afterlife, not to avoid punishment in hell, but rather, we are moved by the free and inexhaustible love and forgiveness of the divine Spirit.

So we are able to love God, and to love our neighbours as ourselves, truly from the heart. We are able to forgive, and to be gentle in our judgments about the sins of others, because we ourselves are loved and forgiven.

Thanks be to God for the gospel!