Reformation Courage

October 27, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Karen McArthur

Texts: Mark 10: 17-31

This Sunday before All Saints' Day is celebrated as Reformation Sunday in recognition of the 95 theses that Martin Luther wrote 507 years ago. I've known that much for a while, but I am mostly a congregationalist, and my familiarity with church history is a bit scarce prior to the 17th century. So I've done a deep dive into the 16th century this week.

I don't know what image you might have of Martin Luther in your mind, (I knew about Martin Luther King, Jr. before I knew about Martin Luther), but when he wrote his 95 theses in 1517, he was 33 years old and had been a priest for just a decade. Back then, they didn't say "Catholic priest"; it was just "priest." There was one church. (Well, not exactly; there was one church in the west. The Great Schism of 1054 that split the eastern Orthodox Catholic church centered in Constantinople from the western Catholic church centered in Rome is a story for another day.)

Martin Luther was ordained by the Church in 1507, received two bachelor degrees and began teaching theology at the University of Wittenberg in 1508. He earned his Doctor of Theology in 1512, and became chair of the department. He was 29 years old. In 1515 he was made provincial vicar, which meant that he was responsible for eleven monasteries in the region. He sounds like what we might call a "rising star" today: a young, wise, enthusiastic leader. However, there were a number of things that he didn't agree with, and he was not one to acquiesce. And that's where it gets interesting. And consequential.

In the German church at the time, people were committing sins, and then receiving forgiveness by making a payment to the church, called an "indulgence." The money was sent to Rome to rebuild the 4th century St. Peter's Basilica, a capital project that began in 1506 and wasn't completed until 1626 (imagine being on that B&G committee!) This sale of indulgences to forgive wrongdoing infuriated Luther for multiple reasons. And so he outlined his 95 grievances to his bishop (in Latin).

 #1 When Jesus said "repent" he meant that believers should live a whole life repenting, rather than expect repentance granted to them by an external system.
 #6 Only God can forgive – not a priest.
 #86: Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the riches of the richest, build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?

When he finished his Theses, things moved quickly … even by today's standards, and all without the internet or FedEx. The bishop didn't respond, but forwarded the document to Rome within a month. His Theses were printed for distribution within two weeks. (The Gutenberg printing press was invented nearby in 1450, and by 1500 had spread to over 200 cities in Europe.) Within two months they had been translated into German, and were circulated widely in France, England and Italy. Students came to Wittenberg to hear him speak. Meanwhile, the Pope put together heresy proceedings and in 1521, Luther

was excommunicated. He was declared an outlaw, his publications were banned.[1] If someone were to kill him, there would be no legal consequence. It became a crime for anyone to give him food or shelter.

Wow! It would have been so much easier if he were silenced. But Luther kept writing, and his ideas resonated with the people, and that made all the difference. Clearly someone was feeding him and sheltering him. Others took up the cause and shared their own ideas, moving beyond what Luther had outlined. There were riots and rebellion and insurrection … much to Luther's dismay. During Lent of 1522, he courageously returned to Wittenberg and preached a sermon every day, focusing on Christian values of love, patience, charity and freedom, and to "trust God's word rather than violence to bring about necessary change". Luther's return quieted things down, but not completely.

The parallels to our own day are striking, aren't they? Luther tried to walk a fine line between his disdain for the abuses of wealth, and his support of the system. He was a reformer, more than he was a revolutionary. He didn't go so far as to side with the peasants to wanted to attack the nobles. He wrote in Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants,[2] "the gospel does not make goods common, except in the case of those who, of their own free will, do what the apostles and disciples did in Acts 4. They did not demand, as do our insane peasants in their raging, that the goods of others—of Pilate and Herod—should be common, but only their own goods. Our peasants, however, want to make the goods of other men common, and keep their own for themselves."

Without Luther's support, the peasants gave up and Luther's reform grew within the existing structures. Although he had spoken out against the celibacy requirement, he hadn't married due to the threats on his life. However, by 1525 he was married. The next year, the emperor's authorities concluded that each state should "live, rule and believe as it may hope and trust to answer before God."[3] The next three years were a bit tense, and then a 1529 regathering came to be called the "Protestation at Speyer." The delegates were no longer subject to the secular authority in matters of religious faith. And that is where the label "Protestant" comes from.

Luther wasn't the only Reformer. In Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingli believed that the word of the Bible was a higher authority than human sources, and that the Eucharist was symbolic rather than the actual body of Christ. In 1522, while Luther was trying to quiet the riots, Zwingli spoke out against the practice of fasting during Lent. A generation later, John Calvin was born in France and eventually moved to Geneva. Trained as a lawyer, his reforms centered on church governance and liturgy. The Mass was abolished in Geneva in 1536. Meanwhile, England had been going through its own issues, with Henry VIII eventually achieving the separation of the Church of England from Rome in the 1530s. In 1543 in Scotland, John Knox converted to Christianity and moved to Geneva where he learned from John Calvin. He returned to Scotland and led the Protestant Reformation there. In the Netherlands, a 1581 law repurposed catholic churches for the Dutch Reformed Church and prohibited public expression of the Catholic faith. (I learned about that touring the museum of Our Lord in the Attic – a five-story home in Amsterdam that hid an entire Catholic church in its upper three floors.)

So with all of this going on, what we call "The Reformation" didn't happen at once, but over several decades. It was led by a few bold, strong leaders, but it's also important to note that it was followed by many, and that made it possible. Overall, it was a time of great change in the areas of communication

[1] Edict of Worms (May 1521)
[2] Luther, Martin. Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants, 1525.
[3] Diet of Speyer (1526)

and transportation, commerce and trade, science and religion, affecting every aspect of every individual's life, and the life of the community. Would Luther's writings spread so quickly without the printing press? The earliest leaders, Luther and Zwingli, hoped to reform the church – what we now know as the Roman Catholic church. It wasn't until the next generation, Calvin and Knox, that the split with Rome became real. The changes were significant.

The Latin of the Mass was replaced by scriptures translated into the everyday language of the people -- German and French and English – so that worship was led in the languages that the people could understand. Music that had been sung only by the choirs was introduced to the congregations, sparking a great tradition of hymns – Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" or the still familiar Old Hundredth. The reformers challenged the divine/human relationship that went from God to the Pope to the bishops to the priests to the people. It was a linear relationship that had provided stability and order for centuries. But the only way to God was through the priests. The reformers believed that ordinary people should be able to read and understand the scripture, and receive God's revelation directly. The Reformation empowered individuals, but not exclusively for their own independent purposes, but freeing them to serve others, to work for the interdependent common good.

So how do we read Mark's gospel against this backdrop of reformation and change, and in the midst of our own American uncertainty as we cast our votes over the next ten days? It seems to me that the issue that Jesus taught about, was also addressed by Luther and the 16th century reformers, and is also very present today: that the accumulation of wealth and possessions can be problematic both for individuals and for the common good. Jesus instructed the man to downsize so that he could follow him. Luther risked his life to redirect money of the poor to their own needs and their own communities instead of the accumulation of wealth in the building of a faraway basilica. Wealth inequality is at the root of our current societal conflict as well. The balance between individual responsibility and resources and the way we use them for the common good is a perennial tension.

On this Reformation Sunday, may we find courage in Martin Luther's convictions, hope in the power of the people acting for the common good, and trust in Jesus' teaching that when we let go of our possessions for the sake of the gospel, we will be blessed, now and always. Amen!