

Sermon for October 29, 2017
Reformation Sunday
"Jesus and the Reformation"

Matthew 23:1-12

500 years ago this Tuesday the Protestant reformation began. It was on the eve of All Saints Day October 31, 1517 that Martin Luther, a German monk and priest, nailed his 95 theses in the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. This was the beginning of the Protestant branch of Christianity. The main problem Martin Luther had with the Roman Catholic Church was the sale of indulgences. A part of the Catholic tradition was the performance of penance when one committed a sin. Usually acts of penance were in the form of prayer or study. However penance could be performed by acts of charity or kindness.

This is where money got involved. Sometimes people would make charitable contributions to the church as penance for their sins. This was obviously unfair to those who could not afford such gifts. Sometimes people would even make their contribution before they committed the sin and purchase an indulgence that could be used later as a penance before the fact. Indulgences were also marketed as a way of getting deceased relatives out of purgatory. It was the hypocrisy of indulgences that was at the center of Martin Luther's complaints against the church.

After publishing his 95 theses, or complaints, against the church, Martin Luther was ordered by his superiors to recant or take back his statements. He was finally excommunicated from the church. At one hearing when he was told to deny all he had written, he is reported to have said, "Here I stand, I can do no other." Martin Luther was thrown out of the Roman Catholic Church and finally began what we now call the Lutheran church. Many of the reforms he instituted are still with us today. One of the first things he did after being excommunicated was to translate the Bible into the language of the people, which for Luther was German. So the idea that each person should be able to read and understand the Bible and seek out God's will on their own began with Luther. Luther also taught about the priesthood of all believers and that we are saved by grace not works. From these beginnings all the other Protestant churches: Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, and others grew.

As Methodists, we trace our roots through a different reformer: John Wesley. John Wesley lived about 200 years after Luther. In England the Anglican Church broke away from Rome shortly after Luther's break. But in the 200 years between Luther and Wesley the Church of England came to be in need of reform itself. The problem was not so much corruption as it was apathy. The prevailing attitude was that if one had been baptized into the Church of England one was saved.

John Wesley, who was the son of an Anglican priest, came to believe that salvation was not so much about where you were baptized, but who you are living for now. It didn't matter if your name was on the rolls of the Church of England if Jesus was not in your heart. In Seminary John, his brother Charles, and some others began a Holy Club and rose at 4:00 am to read the Bible and prayed at regular intervals. They were called "Methodists" by those who mocked them because of the methodical life of prayer and Bible study. The members of the Holy Club also devoted themselves to acts of mercy. They helped the poor and counseled condemned prisoners.

Finally, John and Charles came to the same conclusion as Luther. Salvation was a gift from God not something we achieve on our own. John realized that in his religious zeal he was trying to make himself righteous and worthy of God's love. While at a prayer service with some Moravians, John Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" and he realized that God loved him and that was a gift of grace.

So what did John Wesley do? He rose at 4:00 am to study and pray and preached to the masses and helped the needy. The same things he did before, but now he did them out of a love and thankfulness to God and not in an attempt to save himself. After that John Wesley attempted to spiritually reform the Church of England. He taught people that being a Christian was not about being in church occasionally, but living the Christian life on a daily basis. He taught people to read their Bibles and he preached to the people and sent them out to preach in the streets and fields. And in the end he founded a new branch in the Protestant church: Methodists.

The reason I went through all this history is that Jesus faced a situation similar to the one Luther

and Wesley faced. The religious leaders and institutions of Jesus' day had grown corrupt and apathetic. The Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, used religion for their own gain. They read and taught the Scriptures, but then they violated the spirit of the law by their actions. Instead of helping people to live righteously, they placed burdens upon them. Instead of using their positions to teach others, they used them to gain benefit for themselves.

Jesus called attention to their hypocrisy. Jesus told his followers to listen to what the religious leaders had to say. After all they were following in the footsteps of Moses. But they should not follow the example of the religious leaders. Jesus' followers are to practice what they preach.

But most importantly Jesus' followers live by a different standard. The religious leaders lived by the standard that says that being looked up to by others is what is important. A standard which says you should look out for number 1 be the king of the hill. But Jesus said, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves shall be exalted." Jesus said that his followers should live by humility.

We have come a long way in the last 500 years since Luther nailed those 95 theses on the church door. Or have we? It seems to me that the church has the same problems it had way back then and back in Jesus' day. People in positions of leadership allow the power they have to go to their heads. They seek the applause of people instead of trying to be servants of God like the scribes and Pharisees, or they accept bribes of cash for religious or ecclesiastical favors like the leaders in Luther's day, or they allow the comfort of their positions to lull them into apathy like the leaders in Wesley's day. In the end it all adds up to people using positions of power for their own benefits.

That still happens in the church today. People seek positions of leadership today in religious institutions for reasons of personal gain sometimes. Or perhaps they seek them for reasons of sincere faith, but then when they are in those positions they become corrupted or comfortable. Instead of seeking to use their office to serve God they seek to serve themselves.

Now I am not talking about just bishops and denominational presidents and senior pastors of large congregations. Sometimes people covet positions in the church so that they can be looked up to. "Deacon" or "Lay Leader" or "Chair" of this or that committee or "Sunday School Teacher" can be terms that denoting either service or privilege. And as Christians don't we all sometimes fall into the trap of exalting ourselves. We like people acknowledging that we are "Good Christian Folk." Congregations can fall into that trap. We build sanctuaries to worship God in or is it to show off how nice our church is? We built steeples to hold up the cross for all to see or is it to say we have the tallest steeple in town? Or perhaps we do the right thing for the right reason initially, but then we puff out our chests and say "Look what I have done."

The reformation began 500 years ago this month; or did it? When I was preparing for this sermon I discovered that the foundation for what Luther did was really laid many years before. Teachers and theologians had already criticized some of the practices of the church, and much of Luther's theology was actually grew out of his study of Augustine and other early church theologians. And weren't their teachings ultimately based on Jesus.

Maybe the reformation began 2000 years ago when Jesus said "the first shall be last" and "those who humble themselves shall be exalted." Maybe the reformation did not begin on a piece of paper nailed to a church door, but in the hearts of believers. Maybe "Reformation Sunday" should not be about the history of the Protestant church. Maybe it is really about people like Luther and Wesley and you and me having our hearts strangely warmed by the love and grace of God.

When I thought about writing this sermon I thought I should end with where the church needs reforming today. I thought I would outline my 95 theses and nail them to the door of the church's home page. But I only have one thesis for reforming the church today and I didn't even write it. Jesus said, "whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted." (Matthew 23:12) That is where all reformation needs to begin. It begins in the hearts of believers who will humble themselves to serve God and their neighbor. Would you care to start a reformation today? Then start here. (Pointing to the heart.)