

What's at Stake

Reformation Sunday
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

8:15 & 11:00 a.m. Sunday, October 31, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Romans 3: 19-28

Albert of Brandenburg, the newly appointed Archbishop of Mainz, found himself deeply in debt. Pope Leo X bestowed his appointment as Archbishop on condition of a rather handsome remuneration, and, in order to meet Leo's conditions, Albert had to mortgage himself up to his eyeballs. In other words, he bought his Archbishopric, and at a very steep price.

But Pope Leo harbored an ambition of his own -- the completion of St. Peter's Church in Rome. So, Pope and Archbishop, both in need of funds, devised a scheme to raise enormous amounts of money from the good folk they were bound by vows to serve: an indulgence campaign. The sinners of the Empire, all devout believers, worried about their final destinations beyond death; all of them expected to toast and roast, for a time at least, in the flames of hell. The clerics plan was simple. These citizens of the Empire, for a specific sum of money, could shorten their stays in the place no one wanted to go and most were sure they were going. They could decrease the demerits chalked up against them on the celestial scorecard by cashing in on the merits of Christ and the saints. In other words, God's goodness, the grace of Christ, went up for sale and a smart investor could claim a piece of heaven, not only for her or himself, but with an additional premium, could claim a piece for the family, for ancestors long gone and even for one's progeny. With all the talk in recent years of health care and Medicare, consider this a version of "Heavenly Life Insurance" paid through an indulgence, and Leo's Cathedral and Albert's mortgage got paid as a bonus.

To accomplish their scheme, a Dominican monk named John Tetzel, one of the best indulgence salesmen of his day, was dispatched to the hinterland proclaiming that "for each coin which in the coffer rings, another soul from Hades springs." And although this was a clever little jingle that played well on radio and TV commercials, the appointment of Tetzel proved to be disastrous.

You see, Germans already seethed under the yoke of Empire and papacy. They were sick of their politics being determined by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, a seventeen-year-old Spaniard; and they resented the management of their religious life by an ambitious force beyond the Alps, Leo X. Therefore, when John Tetzel approached the town of Wittenburg, and a thirty-four-year-old Augustinian monk, who was Professor of Theology at the University, in heated response to the indulgence, raised some issues for public debate, the religious and the political pot boiled over. The ninety-five theses nailed to the church door at Wittenburg on All Hallows' Eve, October 31, 1517, triggered more than a debate (actually, no one ever showed up for the forum Luther had planned), but what was triggered was a movement that had far more consequences than those at the moment could ever imagine; what one scholar has labeled the "nail pound heard round the world." And Martin Luther -- scholar, teacher, pastor, preacher; impeccably orthodox and loyal -- became what he least intended or desired to be; but perhaps what, in the mysteries of providence, he was most fitted to be, namely, a prophetic reformer of the church.

The question is: what motivated Luther's indignation against the sale of indulgences? What had become lost to the church? Indeed, what was at stake in the theological revolt that became known as the Reformation?

It's very simple: what was at stake was the very Gospel itself. The early reformers devised no new plans of their own to counterattack the excesses of their church. Rather, they went right to Scripture, and what became one of the battle-cries of the Reformation was shouted: *sola scriptura*. Scripture alone is the only true norm according to which teachings and teachers are to be judged.

And there, in the New Testament, the Gospel, the Good News God has for his people, was rediscovered Paul's freeing words: "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5: 1). Peace with God -- not through indulgences. Peace with God -- not through obedience to Pope or monarch. Peace with God -- not through adherence to a doctrine, a catechism, or a religious observance. Peace with God -- acceptance, forgiveness, dignity -- not through anything we might do, or say, or buy, or bargain for, but by grace alone. *Sola Gratia* -- the second of the cries of the evangelical reformers.

In Paul's majestic letter to the Church at Rome, Luther discovered what he personally longed for, peace and forgiveness, and what the church had lost in all its schemes and practices. Luther would call this epistle the "most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest expression." There it was, right in the New Testament -- the Good News Luther, and we, need to hear again and again for our lives. Amid all our brokenness, and self-deception; amid all our failures in commitment and responsibility to those closest to us; amid the injuries we inflict on one another and upon ourselves; amid the traumas of an Auschwitz or a Bosnia or a Sudan; amid the competing and conflicting voices seeking our allegiance, the grace of God continues to seek us out, eager to transform our hearts and to change our world into God's Kingdom. Though we may destroy ourselves, grace, born of God's love, never lets us go. Grace -- through all the efforts we make to build our own world, protect our own turf, set our own rules, create our own monuments -- grace continues to call us, invite us to a new life where Christ is the head, and we are his Body in service to love in this world.

My friends in Christ, make no mistake about it -- at stake in the Reformation was the very Gospel itself, and Luther had the insight and the courage to know that. The God of the New Testament is not like a parent whose love and forgiveness depends upon the child's doing the right thing. Jesus makes that clear in parable after parable. In probably the most famous story of the Bible, when the son returns home from his pig sty, his father does not say to him: "Well, son, wash the camels, clean the stables, mow the yard, and when you're finished we'll talk about your promising never to do what you did again, and then I'll consider whether you've *earned* my love." That's not the way the story goes. As the son crawls home, no doubt practicing his excuses, forging his *quid pro quo*, the father runs to meet him, and, before one word of apology or any excuse can be uttered, wraps the boy in his great robe, hugs him, and throws the party of the year in the valley. *Sola Gratia!*

That's the heart of the Gospel. As Paul says so eloquently in our text for today: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

God does not wait for us to become perfect, or godly, or good. We are forgiven and reconciled, while we are yet undeserving. That's what grace is. That grace converted Paul. That forgiveness recreated Luther; and that same unflagging, undeserved love releases you and me for service and new life today.

Thank God for the evangelical reformers and their allegiance to scripture and the good news found in there for all of us -- namely, the grace of God, for without that grace, I would contend, we would, indeed, be lost, seeking still to devise clever plans of our own to help relieve our anxieties about the God we worship and our worthiness to stand before such a God. But, we need not worry, for we know, thanks to the reformers, that we are justified, made right, put back into right relationship with God, by His grace as a gift, through his son, Jesus the Christ.

AMEN.