

19th Sunday after Pentecost - October 15, 2017

Matthew 22:1-14, Exodus 32:1-14, Philippians 4:1-9, Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

Reformation 500, Sermon 1 of 3

“The 95 Theses - Sweeping Away the Idols”

Emphasis from today’s Exodus reading

On October 31, 1517, Dr. Martin Luther, Augustinian friar and lecturer at the University of Wittenberg, made public his 95 Theses, challenging the church’s practice of selling indulgences as a way for people to have their sins forgiven. By issuing this challenge, Luther inadvertently set a series of events in motion that we now call The Reformation. On the Sunday after next we will be marking this historic moment with a special service; but in the lead up to that service and as part of that service, I will be offering a three part sermon series I am calling “Reformation 500.” Today’s sermon has the title, “The 95 Theses - Sweeping Away the Idols.” So let’s begin.

Twelve years after Luther posted his 95 Theses, he issued what came to be known as The Large Catechism, for use by pastors and teachers. In the Large Catechism, in the section on the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods,” Luther says the following about idolatry:

A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe said god with our whole heart...If your faith and trust are right, then your god is the true God. On the other hand, if your faith is false and wrong, then you have not the true God...That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your god. [Large Catechism, First Part “The Ten Commandments”, The First Commandment]

The underlying problem with selling indulgences as a way for people to have their sins forgiven is that it is seriously unscriptural. But more than that, the entire practice and the theological logic behind it amount to the papacy and the church in general making an idol of itself. The message was pretty clear: “Don’t bother turning to God or Christ to ask for forgiveness, we have the matter in hand. Pay us the right amount of money and we’ve got you covered.”

How the papacy and the church got to that point is a long a complex story, but I will try to summarize it briefly because it is a kind of cautionary tale about losing sight of the original reason for things.

In the New Testament and in the early church, the local congregation exercised discipline on its members by barring people from communion or sometimes even

from coming to the worship. If the person showed remorse for their wrongdoing and came seeking forgiveness, the congregation would forgive them and invite them back in to the worship life of the community. This came to be called “granting an indulgence.”

After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, what had been a fluid, locally controlled process, fell prey to the organizing and regimenting forces in any bureaucracy. And so, in the acts of the Seven Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea I 325 - Nicaea II 787), such punishments were standardized and control over them placed in the hands of the priests and bishops. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, this is technically still where things are at.

In the western church, however, following the last of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, there were a series of conceptual changes to both penance and to the understanding of church authority that led to more authority being placed in the office of the Bishop of Rome, the office we know as the papacy. And so, in 1095, when the papacy was trying to recruit knights and kings to go on what we now call the First Crusade, the Pope of the day issued a plenary indulgence for all who would fight for the faith to “liberate” the Holy Land. At that point the indulgence granted was only for sins committed while on the Crusade, but even that is problematic because it constituted forgiving the sins of warriors before they had even committed them.

Similar indulgences were granted in subsequent Crusades. Then, in 1300, as the crusading fervour diminished, the Pope of the day, in conjunction with declaring the year 1300 a jubilee year, granted a plenary indulgence to pilgrims who came to Rome to visit the holy shrines. By the year 1400 indulgences were being granted to anyone who paid money to the papacy to get them.

I’m sure that at each step along the way, it all made perfect sense, but the sum total of these developments was to lose touch completely with the point of the indulgence in the first place, namely, to reconcile a wrongdoer to his or her local worshipping community.

Today’s reading from Exodus 32 can serve as a kind of thumbnail version of this story. The people haven’t seen Moses for 7 or 8 days. From their perspective, he went up the mountain to be with his god, and he still hasn’t come back. So you can see why the people are getting antsy. They think that maybe the god of “this man Moses” might have abandoned them or killed Moses, so they tell Aaron to make a golden calf—a god that is essentially like the ones they remembered from Egypt.

The big difference between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the gods of, say, the Egyptians or Canaanites, is that these other gods were something like good

luck charms. If you gave them what they wanted—which was usually sacrifices—they would do stuff for you.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, however, had a larger purpose: namely, the transformation of these freed slaves into a people who would be a light to the world. That is why the covenant with the people of Israel, as we read it in Exodus, begins with the Ten Commandments. This is about becoming people who live an exemplary ethical life as an expression of the holiness that comes from God.

But the truth about us humans is that we would rather not have to be any more ethical than is necessary, and if we can have some shortcuts, we will gladly take them. We tend to search in our minds (even if we don't admit it to ourselves) for how little we have to do to still be acceptable. Being ethical is hard work. Really living up to the Ten Commandments is hard work. From a purely human perspective, it's better if we can have a god we can just pay money to who doesn't ask us to change; thus, the Golden Calf made from the gold that people gave—and thus the selling of indulgences.

And so Luther began his 95 Theses with these words:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," [Matthew 4:17] he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Now, if Luther had only written a treatise on the need for true, daily, heartfelt repentance, no one would have taken much notice, because there were actually a lot of writings like that that had been circulating since the earliest days of Christianity. In fact, the social, political, and ecclesiastical calamities of the 1300's and 1400's gave rise to a strong lay movement called the "Friends of God"—represented in many parts of Europe, but especially in Germany—that emphasized the renunciation of the self. In terms of repentance, Luther was not saying anything that hadn't already been said a thousand times.

What was different was that in the 95 Theses, Luther took direct aim at the very conceptual foundation on which the papacy had built its decrees, giving itself the authority to forgive sins. And so Luther writes such things as:

5. The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons.

6. The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by showing that it has been remitted by God...

7. God remits guilt to no one unless at the same time God humbles that person in all things...

41. Papal indulgences must be preached with caution, lest people erroneously think

that they are preferable to other good works of love.

42. Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend that the buying of indulgences should in any way be compared with works of mercy.

47. Christians are to be taught that the buying of indulgences is a matter of free choice, not commanded.

48. Christians are to be taught that the pope, in granting indulgences, needs and thus desires their devout prayer more than their money.

49. Christians are to be taught that papal indulgences are only useful if they do not put their trust in them, but very harmful if they lose their fear of God because of them.

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.

51. Christians are to be taught that the pope would and should wish to give of his own money, even though he had to sell the basilica of St. Peter, to many of those from whom certain hawkers of indulgences cajole money.

52. It is vain to trust in salvation by indulgence letters...

81. This unbridled preaching of indulgences makes it difficult even for learned men to rescue the reverence due to the pope from slander or from the shrewd questions of the laity,

82. Such as, "Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of souls that are there if he is able to redeem an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?"

86. Again, "Why does the pope, whose wealth is greater today than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his won money rather than the money of poor believers?"

I could go on, but you get the idea. The papacy and the church had become their own idols. Rather than asking people to surrender their hearts to God seeking God's forgiveness, they were asking people to surrender their money to the church. Rather than teaching people that forgiveness comes from God through our faith in Jesus Christ, they were teaching people that forgiveness comes by way of a financial transaction controlled by the hierarchy of the church.

And so next week I will focus on the role of the Gospel in the Reformation in a sermon I am calling, "The Augsburg Confession - The Gospel as the Heart of the Church". Amen.

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