

## 20th Sunday after Pentecost - October 22, 2017

Matthew 22:15-22, Exodus 33:12-23, I Thessalonians 1:1-10, Psalm 99

Reformation 500, Sermon 2 of 3

“The Augsburg Confession - Restoring the Gospel to the Heart of the Church”  
Emphasis from today’s readings from I Thessalonians and Matthew

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther called for a public discussion of the matter of selling “Letters of Indulgence” by the posting 95 talking points we now call The 95 Theses. He did this out of frustration at the way that the church was cynically exploiting people’s fears of eternal punishment to sell them these “Letters of Indulgence” as a quick way to have some of those punishments relieved.

But there was more than theology going on here. You see the indulgence letters being sold in Germany at the time were issued for two purposes: 1) to raise money for the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome; and 2) to pay off the debt that Albert of Hohenzollern had incurred with lenders to fund the large bribe that Albert had paid to the papacy to get appointed to be the bishop of three different bishoprics. The speed and intensity with which the general populace reacted to Luther’s protest shows that Luther wasn’t the only one who was frustrated.

Last week I focused on those 95 Theses. Luther’s emphasis in The 95 Theses is that forgiveness comes only from God, and that our side of that equation is not “buying letters issued by the ecclesiastical authorities”, but rather our deep and sincere repentance before God. When in today’s Gospel reading Jesus says “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s,” this is in part what he is talking about.

The 95 Theses were only meant to be a discussion starter, but the matter snowballed into a religious, social, and even political movement far beyond what Luther had ever hoped or imagined.

To be clear: The 95 Theses were only addressing one little piece of a much larger problem. The wider church had lost its way over the centuries so that the thing that is front and centre in the New Testament—namely the Gospel—had gotten lost in all of the rules and mechanisms that councils, patriarchs, and popes had introduced over the centuries, and by all the politics that come with power. So, Luther and the others reasoned that if this call for reforming the church was going to be meaningful, the key would be putting the Gospel back at the centre of the church’s life and teaching.

In 1520, three years after the posting of The 95 Theses, Pope Leo X issued a pa-

pal bull giving Luther 60 days to recant or be declared a heretic. Luther responded by publishing three treatises that lay out his basic ideas. The first was an open letter entitled "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation". The second was called "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church." And the third was called "The Freedom of a Christian," which he sent directly to Pope Leo with an accompanying letter. Let me read for you the key section of his opening remarks in "The Freedom of a Christian":

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul's own statements, who says in I Corinthians 9:19, "For though I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all," and in Romans 13:8, "Owe no one anything except to love one another." Love, by its nature is ready to serve and be subject to the one who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was "born of woman, born under the law" [Galatians 4:4], and therefore was at the same time a free man and a servant, [both] "in the form of God" and "of a servant" [Philippians 2:6-7].

The Gospel and Jesus are inseparable. No Jesus, no Gospel. The lived pattern of self-emptying and self-giving love embodied by Jesus form the "inner content", the "heart content" of the Gospel. It is one thing to believe in a God in heaven who makes moral and ethical demands on us here on earth; it is a different matter to enter into the heart and spirit of the God who comes to us in and through Jesus Christ. The Gospel—the good news of God's love poured out for the world in Jesus Christ—makes us free to love, and in loving we choose to make ourselves servants.

It is a difficult concept for to grasp from an ordinary materialistic point of view, and Luther even says in "The Freedom of a Christian":

It is impossible to write well about [faith] or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a person when trials oppress. But the one who has had even a faint taste of it can never write enough, speak enough, meditate enough, or even hear enough about it.

It was not until 1530, at the Diet of Augsburg, some 13 years after Luther had posted The 95 Theses, and 10 years after he had published "The Freedom of a Christian" that the theologians and princes of the reform movement were able to present a document that represented not just one man's words, but the teachings and practices of the whole group. That document is now called The Augsburg Confession.

The Augsburg Confession was conceived as a document of reconciliation. The

people who put it together wanted to show that there was nothing particularly radical or dangerous about their movement. At the same time they kept the Gospel front and centre, and expressed their understanding of how you organize the church as an outgrowth of the Gospel. And so, it could be said that the most revolutionary article of the Augsburg Confession ended up being Article VII, which talks about the nature of the church. Let me read it for you:

It is also taught among us that the one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies instituted by men should be observed uniformly in all places. It is as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4-5, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call: one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

Coming out of the understanding that in the Gospel we are free from all laws, rules, ceremonies, and hierarchies; but at the same time in the Gospel, out of love, we are bound to serve all people in love—coming out of this understanding, the reformers thought they were saying, "Hey, you know, we don't have to do everything exactly the same. There's room for diversity and discussion here. We just want the opportunity to clean things up where we are. What do you say?"

The imperial and papal side, for their part, heard something very different. What they heard was, "We don't have to do what you tell us to do."

The heart of the church's problem was that its purpose had ceased to be the proclamation of the Gospel and had become the proclamation of its own authority and power. Jesus had commissioned to Apostles to:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)

What the church had come to do was to make not "disciples" (learners, students), but rather unquestioning spiritual serfs. And rather than teaching them to obey what Jesus commanded, the church taught them to obey what the church commanded.

But the church did still baptize, and it was here where the reformers were confident that not all was lost. Luther and the theologians of the Lutheran Reformation all believed strongly that in the sacraments instituted by Christ, namely Baptism and

Communion, the power of God was active and real regardless of the moral or theological state of those administering these sacraments (see Augsburg Confession Article VIII).

Baptism and Communion are not merely churchly ceremonies. They were commanded directly by Christ. They are connected directly to promises of God's grace. And so, regardless of how the church may have lost its way, the Spirit and power of God was still active in the church, awakening faith, and calling people to faithfulness.

For Luther, the sacrament of Baptism was the very embodiment of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was the ultimate expression of God's grace. For the Gospel is not about how much we do for God, but about how much God does for us. In Article IX of the Augsburg Confession it says:

It is taught among us that Baptism is necessary and that grace is offered through it. Children, too, should be baptized, for in Baptism they are committed to God and become acceptable to him.

An infant brings nothing to Baptism. It is those around the child who act on God's behalf. It is all grace, pure grace, for which we can only give thanks.

And so it is that the Gospel—which is to say, the grace of God expressed to us through the self-emptying and self-giving love of Christ Jesus—must always be at the heart of all we do and teach in the church. Whenever it is not, we have lost our way. Amen.

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