

2009 Global Mission Lenten Series

Reflection

Jean and Steve Godsall-Myers, Germany
Directors of the ELCA Wittenberg Center

Sermon delivered by Stephen Godsall-Myers

Church of All Saints (Castle Church) Wittenberg, 8:00 am, 31 October 2007

Texts for Reformation Day: Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 8:31-36

Note from the Godsall-Myers: This sermon comes from another season – from the last days of Pentecost, Reformation Day. However, we have learned that for many US pilgrims and visitors, their visit to the Castle Church – to worship at a Center service or at a German service, or just to be in this historic place – is a Reformation Day for them. The words of Luther’s first of 95 Theses, posted on the Theses Door, posted inside the Church give a clear Lenten message: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said, ‘Repent’, He called for the entire life of believers to one of repentance.” So, we share this sermon for use in the Lenten season, hoping the timeless message of God’s grace may be proclaimed and heard in another day.

The Truths of This Day

One day! One man! Because of one day and one man, we are gathered in this town, in this church, for this worship service. One day, October 31, 1517, one man, Martin Luther, hammered a piece of paper in a foreign language (Latin) with a few nails on an old wooden door.

One day, one man, made all the difference! On that piece of paper back then, that one man, Martin Luther, began with these words: “Out of love and concern for the truth ...”

Now, out of love and concern for the truth, we could engage in debate with historical scholars – Did Martin Luther really nail the 95 Theses on the doors of this church on October 31, 1517? What evidence do we have for this historic fact? This historic truth? But I would imagine that none of us got up early on this Reformation Day 2007 to hear arguments or a discussion about this truth, this historic fact.

No, we gather this morning in this town, in this church, for this worship service out of love and concern for of a more important truth – the understanding of the Gospel that we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the truth that was of concern to that one man on that one day in October, 1517.

As we come into this church on this day, we should know this is not exactly the same church as it was on that October day, 490 years ago. The Prussians, in the late 19th century, were the last to remodel this old Castle Church which has seen its share of destructive wars and just plain neglect since it was first built by Frederick the Wise at the turn of the 15th century. So, truth be told, the church looks different from the church that Martin Luther knew. The old wooden doors that felt the hammer on that one day long ago, are long gone.

The church on the inside looks a little different, but there are some wonderful truths to be found in this ‘remodeled’ church that has become famous – because of one day and one man. The first

truth one notices upon entering the church today is that the Reformation was more than just one man and one day. The truth is that Martin Luther did not, and does not stand alone in that great movement of seeking and proclaiming the freeing truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yes, Luther does stand in a prominent place, but Luther does not stand alone. He is joined here by others, these statues that surround us in the nave are the figures who surrounded Luther in his time: Philipp Melanchthon, his University colleague, the Greek and Latin Scholar, who helped Luther with his Bible translation, who penned the Augsburg Confession.

Johannes Bugenhagen, Luther's pastor, one who helped the emerging church of the Reformation take shape.

George Spalatin, the advisor to Frederick the Wise who helped keep a tempestuous monk and professor and a powerful Prince connected in a way that would further Luther's work.

Urbanus Rhegius, the scholar who was with Luther in Marburg and with Melanchthon at Augsburg.

Nicholas von Amsdorf, Luther's Wittenberg colleague who was there to support him at Leipzig and Worms.

Justus Jonas who held forth when Luther was at the Wartburg, was at his bedside when he died and preached the funeral oration for Luther in Eisleben.

Johannes Brenz, from Swabia, he was with Luther at the Heidelberg Disputation.

Caspar Cruger, the Wittenberg professor who preached at the Castle Church and edited the Wittenberg edition of Luther's works.

No, Luther was not left standing alone after that one day in October 1517. There were others, many others, stood with him.

But, there is another truth that one sees in this church – the most important truth of the Reformation. When one looks at the altar one sees that Christ is in the center. This is the truth at the heart of Luther's and the others' Reformation understandings: Christ is in the center and anything that threatens to push Christ from his central place in our faith, in our lives, in the life of the church, should – must be – challenged! Yes, Jesus is in the center. Jesus who said, "the truth will make you free!" Jesus who was that one man who on one day, for us, was himself hammered to an old piece of wood, that had a notice, written in three languages (Latin, Hebrew, and Greek), that said: "This is the King of the Jews". Ironically, it was Pilate who ordered this sign to be placed on the Cross; it was Pilate who had once asked Jesus, "What is truth? So we see, the truth can be found in the most unlikely of places!

This place today still invites us to behold the truth – that Christ is in the Center. Christ should be in the center for us, as Luther would later write:

“Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord and has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.”

It is most certainly true, but in Luther’s day, there were too many who no longer were able to see Jesus in his rightful place, in the center. So it was that Luther stood up! Along with many others, he, they stood up – to remind the world, the church, to remind their fellow sisters and brothers in Christ: “Do not allow anything else to be in the center of your lives, of your faith, of your words, of your deeds other than Jesus Christ!” The call of those days was a call to put Christ back in the center where he belonged. It is still a call for all our days as it was on that day in October 1517 when one man began his call with Thesis #1: (Now, maybe some of you know this first of the 95 Theses:)

“When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said, ‘Repent’, He called for the entire life of believers to one of repentance.”

This church gives wonderful testimony to this first Thesis: There in the front, on the sides of the altar, we notice that there are two important figures. They are not standing, but kneeling. They are not the figures of poor, humble peasants of the time, they are powerful rulers of their day – Prince Electors – Frederick the Wise and his brother, John, the Steadfast, who assume the humble position of repentance. Together, they show wisdom and steadfastness by their posture before the One in the center – Jesus. By the way, this picture of the two rulers kneeling before Jesus, is a very ecumenical picture. Frederick, it turns out, never “converted” – he remained with the Church with which he had grown up. His brother, John, did change and joined the new Church of the Reformation. So, here they kneel together, brothers, brothers in Christ, on both sides of the Reformation divide, joined by the truth, that Jesus Christ is in the center. An ecumenical picture for us today.

There is another aspect of this remodeled church that is noteworthy and certainly gives me as a preacher something to think about. If you look around, there are nine Reformers depicted on pedestals around the church nave. Nine important people. The tenth spot, at least the spot, where the 10th statue could or would or should be ... is here – where the pulpit is. Now that is just the kind of thing that can go to a preacher’s head. Standing up here in the Castle Church with all these great persons of the past, you look out on the congregation to preach your glorious sermon, you have taken your place in history, and you might just forget to look back toward that altar, and you might forget exactly where you stand. By no means in the center! Perhaps for this reason, this pulpit is ‘surrounded’ by others who are ready to help the preacher – carved on its sides are the four Evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They surround the preacher and, one sees that they are all about the task of presenting the Gospel, the Good News that puts Jesus in the center – the center of the story, the center of history. The four are not standing, not kneeling – they are sitting, perhaps ready to sit on any pastor who wanders from preaching the Gospel, who wanders from the truths about Jesus Christ that set us free.

And, let me turn again, to the One in the Center, Jesus, to make one final observation – Jesus looks out at us, with a hand that beckons, that calls us. We know that Jesus gave the call to repent. The call to turn back to him, to turn away from those thoughts, words and deeds, that lead us away from God and God’s kingdom and God’s truth. The thoughts, words and deeds that were around in 1517, that were around long before and have been around long since. The thoughts, words, and deeds of our lives. Yes, Jesus makes a call, a claim to truth, that demands and requires and invites us to turn to him with our devotion and attention that demands, requires and invites our thoughts, words and deeds. But, along with the hand that beckons us, Jesus has his other hand – on his heart! Jesus is showing us, is telling us that with God – it is a matter of the heart. In Jesus, we see the heart of God, the loving, forgiving heart of God. As Jeremiah tells us today, God wants to speak to our hearts, God wants to write on our hearts to write God’s loving will for the world and our lives on our hearts. God, in Jesus, has reached our hearts.

We gather in this town, in this church for this worship service today because of the one man, the One in the center – Jesus, Jesus, who on one day, in love, died for us. And, we know the truth – that was not to be his last day, the grave of Luther and Melancthon and others in this church give witness to the faith and hope in the truth of another day – the day of resurrection, the day of resurrection when Jesus rose from the dead, the day of resurrection when we will join our Lord in the center of God’s kingdom for all our days, our Lord who us redeemed us. Today is Reformation Day and this, this is still most certainly true! Jesus is our Redeemer, Jesus is in the Center. We are saved by grace through faith in him. Amen.