

Here I Stand: Reformation Sunday
Romans 1:16-17
October 29, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

If you have ever studied history or your own family history, you have discovered something about who you are. How you got to where you are began long before you were born. A few years ago, I was meeting with one of our members who had gone through DNA testing in one of the programs that we hear advertised. Send in a sample of your DNA and by examining your chromosomes they can determine what ethnicities you are. To her surprise, a significant percentage of who she was turned out to be of Jewish descent – something she had never known. But in knowing that, it began to explain all sorts of things from her childhood that had never been talked about. A few years ago, I traveled to the Cornwall region of England which was the birthplace of my grandfather, a man who died before I was born. And tromping through cemeteries and hearing the stories of relatives who still live there, I got acquainted with my grandfather which also helped me understand how I got to where I am. It is often said that we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors.

In two days, we will celebrate one of the most significant events in the history of the world, and many of us – maybe most of us know very little about what happened. One man, Martin Luther, stood up to the most powerful empire of his time at great personal risk and as a result we can gather here today, able to proclaim a God who loves us unconditionally. 500 years ago, that did not happen. So, just days from the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, I would like to provide us with a history lesson and the scripture that rocked the 16th Century world and what we learn from this that can grow our faith.

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in the region of Saxony – now part of Germany. He had a normal childhood, and was sent off to school with the expectation that he would study law and return home to help in the family business. And that's what he did. But at the age of 22, on his way home he was caught in the middle of a violent thunderstorm, and he was so scared that he cried out for God – "If you save me, I'll become a monk." For years, he had been haunted by death, eternity and a God of judgment, and at that moment he wondered, "Will I go to hell or will God save me?" So he made this vow and two months later, he entered a monastery, and when he parents found out, they were furious. They had invested everything in him being a lawyer, and now he simply walked away from all that. Luther felt the only way to be certain about eternity was to devote his life to being a monk. He's smart. He's intense. He's focused, and he's doing everything he could to earn his salvation. Because he believed, as did most people at that time, that any unconfessed sin would carry you straight to hell. Luther felt confession meant confessing everything, even a stray thought unconfessed meant hell. His confessions went on for hours. He would sleep naked on the monastery floor thinking that by punishing his body he might win God's approval. He worked harder than anybody and yet he found no peace, no freedom. What Luther eventually realized was that he hated this God who required all these steps to earn acceptance and love. It's like having a parent who refuses to love you until you earn that love and as much as you try, doing everything you know to do somehow that love is as elusive as ever. But that's not God. It may be your inner psyche or the devil who keeps playing this message – you're not good enough; you will never be good enough, but that's not God. That's not grace, but Luther could not get free from this.

So, finally he turned to scripture, looking for an answer – some key to finding peace with a God who he felt hated him. And in 1517, he discovered a message in the book of Romans: **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace**

through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:23-24) Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1) It is the righteousness of God and not the judgment of God that is given to you as a gift. God knows you and loves you and knows you can't earn this on your own. You are free! And this realization rocked Luther's world. This was the key he had been seeking. It is the grace of Jesus Christ. And he felt a responsibility to share this with others.

At this time, people would come to the priest for confession, and one way to be absolved of a sin was to buy an indulgence. At first, this was meant as some act of good, some act of service because even after forgiveness there a consequence to be paid. But over time the indulgence was seen as a "free get out of jail card." Just pay the fee and avoid the punishment. But then Pope Leo wanted to build St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. And the Pope's idea for a capital campaign was to use indulgences as a way to raise the funds. It was believed that the Pope had banked all of the righteousness of the saints and if you contributed sacrificially, the Pope would apply the righteousness of the saints on your behalf and if you ancestors who had died were in purgatory, they could be freed. So priests were sent from Rome with messages like this one: *"Don't you hear the voices of your wailing dead parents and others who say have mercy upon me. Have mercy upon me because we are in severe punishment and pain. From this you could redeem us with a small alms and yet you do not want to do so."* Who wouldn't contribute to that and set your loved ones free?

But Luther realized this was not winning God's favor, and he decided there needed to be an academic debate about this. So on October 31, 1517, as was the practice at that time, he wrote a call to debate and listed 95 reasons or theses and nailed them to the community bulletin board which was the door to the local church in Wittenberg. That date is now known as Reformation Day. Luther never intended that it be the turning point that it was. He was trying to fix something in the church, and he wrote these 95 theses in Latin which only the academic could read. Here's just two of the 95: #36 - Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters. #82 - Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church? In other words, if the Pope can pray and send people out of purgatory, why doesn't he set them all free instead of waiting for money? But someone translated these 95 theses into the language of the people and then using a recently invented device – the printing press – mass quantities were printed and distributed. And it set off a protest that spread like wildfire. Eventually, the Catholic Church would begin their own counter-reformation but the Protestant reformation was now underway.

In 1521, Luther was called to Rome, but the local prince intervened so a trial was held locally rather than in Rome. Luther was told to recant, but Luther was so fearful of God that he said these now famous words: **I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.** Luther had defied the most powerful empire in the world and was declared a heretic, an outlaw, and if the trial had taken place in Rome, he would have faced being burned at the stake. But he was given refuge and protection by the local prince which allowed Luther to oversee this movement that became known as Protestants.

The central idea was grace. We can connect with God directly, rather than through the church that interprets everything for us. In the 16th Century, the priests were the actors of the Christian faith, and the people were observers. When you went to worship, the congregation did not sing, the priest did and it was in a language the people did not even understand. Only the priest could read from the Bible which was in Latin. In communion, the priests could drink from the cup, but

the people were not worthy enough. They could only receive the bread. The priest would intercede to God on the people's behalf because the people could not do this on their own. But Luther looked at scripture and said God in his love, invites you to bring everything to God and trust that God has set you free.

What Luther discovered in Paul's letter to the Roman was justification by faith. You have been justified, made right with God. In the moment you trust God, you are free. It's what happened to Abraham. God broke through in his life and asked Will you trust me? All it took to be in a relationship with God was trust and acceptance. It breaks God's heart if there is anything at all that is keeping us from God. God is saying, Just bring it to me. I care more about your life and your marriage and your family that you do. Just bring it to me. There is always this temptation that we need to do something – try harder, work harder, but the message is No. Just have faith in the one who has done everything.

200 years after Luther's insight, a young Anglican priest, John Wesley, was struggling with his own faith, not feeling good enough, not feeling that God counted him as good enough. On the evening of May 24, 1738, he went to a Bible study at a home on Aldersgate Street in London and as Wesley was listening to Luther's commentary to the book of Romans he says: **"While [Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."** It's not by works, but we trust in God's goodness and mercy.

Some persons grew up in homes where your parents never told you that you were loved and valued. You grew up thinking you were never good enough. No matter what you did they were never proud of you. And you know the impact that has had on the rest of your life. Some of you have spent your life trying to win their approval. Even after they died, you are still trying. You still want them to say, "I love you. I'm proud of you." What a difference if the message you hear your entire life is you are loved and valued – and the rest of your life is lived in grateful response, because you can't earn that love. It is guaranteed. It is unconditional. That's the faith that Martin Luther discovered. That's the faith proclaimed by the apostle Paul: "It is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believed."

Last Tuesday, I took my daughter Bethany to the airport. She is 31 and I've made that drive from home to airport many times. But every time I do, there are some things I want to say to her and last Tuesday was no exception. But I could barely get the words out because there is so much emotion. I wanted her to know how important she is, how much she is loved and how there is nothing that can ever change that. And I wanted her to know if there is anything – anything at all that she needs, just ask. She is returning in a few weeks, but still I wanted her to know. And we stood at the curb at the airport and I hugged her, I did not want to let her go until she heard once more, I love you.

And that's the way God loves you. God loves you. There's nothing you can do about that. God loves you. And that's the starting point – and how you live is your response to that love.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of October 29, 2017

Weekly Prayer: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your

hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen. (*Martin Luther's morning prayer*)

Monday, October 30

Scripture: Revelation 2:1-5

“Write this to the angel of the church in Ephesus: These are the words of the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven gold lampstands: I know your works, your labor, and your endurance. I also know that you don't put up with those who are evil. You have tested those who say they are apostles but are not, and you have found them to be liars. You have shown endurance and put up with a lot for my name's sake, and you haven't gotten tired. But I have this against you: you have let go of the love you had at first. So remember the high point from which you have fallen. Change your hearts and lives and do the things you did at first. If you don't, I'm coming to you. I will move your lampstand from its place if you don't change your hearts and lives.

Observation: Many of the details were time-specific, but the spiritual failings that triggered the Reformation 500 years ago were not new. Centuries earlier, Revelation told the church in Ephesus that they had let go of their first love for God and God's kingdom. In 1510, the conscientious young Augustinian monk Martin Luther visited Rome. In his biography of Luther, Roland Bainton wrote, “On making his general confession he was dismayed by the incompetence of the confessor. The abysmal ignorance, frivolity and levity of the Italian priests stupefied him.”

Application: Surely, even those Roman priests wouldn't have said their goal was to be incompetent and ignorant. But over time, matters that once seemed important can become routine, especially if we forget why we are doing them. Is there any part of your faith journey (worship, prayer, Bible reading, communion) that once mattered a lot, but now feels routine, or even abandoned?

Prayer: Lord God, I love you. I want my service to you to grow out of that maturing yet ever-fresh love. Guide me and help me know how to always keep my love for you alive. Amen.

Tuesday, October 31

Scripture: James 4:4-7

You unfaithful people! Don't you know that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? Or do you suppose that scripture is meaningless? Doesn't God long for our faithfulness in the life he has given to us? But he gives us more grace. This is why it says, God stands against the proud, but favors the humble. Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will run away from you.

Observation: Luther didn't merely protest poor church practices. His deeper concern was that indulgences, relics, and confession led people to trust in their own activity instead of God's grace. “He began to hear a new voice in the very texts of Scripture he was poring over...Luther was surprised to find what he called ‘the gospel,’ as something apart from ‘the law.’ Christ alone makes sinners right with God through faith only...Then he was quickly led to a series of amazing conclusions about the church practices he grew up with.” (Roland Bainton, “Here I Stand”)

Application: James, who is sometimes misread as saying we can try to earn God's favor by being good, said God "gives us more grace." The actions to which he called his readers (James 2:14-18) were active expressions of gratitude for God's saving grace, not in any sense a means of earning God's favor. How can you use your gifts actively in God's service, while never slipping into a belief that your service earns God's grace rather than growing out the abundance of grace?

Prayer: God, when I need it, you always give me more grace. Thank you for your amazing patience and forgiveness. Help me to live out your gift by blessing others in any ways you give me the gifts to do so. Amen.

Wednesday, November 1

Scripture: Hosea 14:1-2

Return, Israel, to the LORD your God; you have stumbled because of your wickedness. Prepare to speak and return to the LORD; say to the LORD, "Forgive all wickedness; and receive the good. Instead of bulls, let us offer what we can say:

Observation: As Luther more fully internalized his understanding of God's gracious ways, he became more prophetic in challenging medieval practices like selling indulgences to release souls from purgatory. At one point, he wrote, "If the pope does have the power to release anyone from purgatory, why in the name of love does he not abolish purgatory by letting everyone out? If for the sake of miserable money he released uncounted souls, why should he not for the sake of most holy love empty the place?"

Application: God's people have needed to listen to Hosea's heartfelt plea ("Return, Israel, to the Lord your God") many times through the centuries. As we remember Luther's powerful living out of that plea 500 years ago, we are challenged to look at our own lives, and the church in which we worship God. Are we living lives that share the light of God's grace with everyone with whom we come in contact? Are we organizing and sustaining our church activities in ways that express God's wonderful grace?

Prayer: Great God, you always stand ready to flood our hurting world with your grace. Keep me and my church open and receptive to living out that grace in all we do and say about you. Amen.

Thursday, November 2

Scripture: Romans 3:9-4:3; Romans 5:1-11

So what are we saying? Are we better off? Not at all. We have already stated the charge: both Jews and Greeks are all under the power of sin. As it is written, There is no righteous person, not even one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who looks for God. They all turned away. They have become worthless together. There is no one who shows kindness. There is not even one. Their throat is a grave that has been opened. They are deceitful with their tongues, and the poison of vipers is under their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are quick to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and they don't know the way of peace. There is no fear of God in their view of the world. Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, in order to shut every mouth and make it so the whole world has to answer to God. It follows that no human being will be treated as righteous in his presence by doing what the Law says, because the knowledge of sin comes through the Law. But now God's righteousness has been revealed apart from the

Law, which is confirmed by the Law and the Prophets. God's righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him. There's no distinction. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus. Through his faithfulness, God displayed Jesus as the place of sacrifice where mercy is found by means of his blood. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness in passing over sins that happened before, during the time of God's patient tolerance. He also did this to demonstrate that he is righteous in the present time, and to treat the one who has faith in Jesus as righteous. What happens to our bragging? It's thrown out. With which law? With what we have accomplished under the Law? No, not at all, but through the law of faith. We consider that a person is treated as righteous by faith, apart from what is accomplished under the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Isn't God the God of Gentiles also? Yes, God is also the God of Gentiles. Since God is one, then the one who makes the circumcised righteous by faith will also make the one who isn't circumcised righteous through faith. Do we then cancel the Law through this faith? Absolutely not! Instead, we confirm the Law.

So what are we going to say? Are we going to find that Abraham is our ancestor on the basis of genealogy? Because if Abraham was made righteous because of his actions, he would have had a reason to brag, but not in front of God. What does the scripture say? Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness combined with our faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us. So, now that we have been made righteous by his blood, we can be even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him. If we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son while we were still enemies, now that we have been reconciled, how much more certain is it that we will be saved by his life? And not only that: we even take pride in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, the one through whom we now have a restored relationship with God.

Observation: In Luther's day, the primary emphasis of the Christian life was placed on doing good works – saying so many prayers, giving so much in the offering plate, doing so many acts of piety, in order to attain salvation. Luther struggled with feelings of inadequacy and with a fear of God's judgment until, as he studied Paul's letter to the Romans, he came to understand that we are made right with God (justified) by God, as a gift – our only response is to trust God – hence we are justified by faith.

Application: What difference does it make if God gives you the gift of salvation, and you accept it by faith and then live a grateful life in response, versus trying to win God's approval and salvation by performing good works? Have you put your trust in God's grace and love? Thank God for the gift of salvation he has already given you through Christ.

Prayer: Gracious God, your love never fails. You have given me life and abundant opportunity to know you and to be guided by you. Help me to be conscious of your eternal power and grace each and every day. Amen.

Friday, November 3

Scripture: Acts 17:10-12; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

As soon as it was dark, the brothers and sisters sent Paul and Silas on to Berea. When they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. The Berean Jews were more honorable than those in Thessalonica. This was evident in the great eagerness with which they accepted the word and examined the scriptures each day to see whether Paul and Silas' teaching was true. Many came to believe, including a number of reputable Greek women and many Greek men.

But you must continue with the things you have learned and found convincing. You know who taught you. Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

Observation: Luther saw so much in the church of his day that was not only absent from the scriptures, but antithetical to the scriptures. It was commonly taught that the church had an authority that was greater than the scriptures. Luther came to see the scriptures as having a greater authority than the church, and that the church must conform her teaching to the scriptures. He also believed that Christians should read, or if they could not read, at least hear, the scriptures, to reflect upon them, and to allow them to shape our lives.

Application: Luther believed truth must be determined by studying the scripture. In Acts, how did the Bereans seek to determine if Paul's preaching was true? In the reading from 2 Timothy, Paul challenges Timothy to read and study the scriptures – why? When you read the scriptures invite God to speak to you through them.

Prayer: Holy God, thank you for the way that you have preserved the message of scripture so that I can receive the encouragement and direction that you want for my life. Grant that each day as I read from the Bible, you will speak your message into my life. Amen.

Saturday, November 4

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:4-5; Ephesians 4:11-13

Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God's perspective it is chosen, valuable. You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. His purpose was to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son. God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ.

Observation: In Luther's day, the priests were the primary actors in the Christian faith. They received the Eucharist; the congregation watched. They chanted the songs of praise; the congregation listened. They were the mediators between God and their congregation. Luther read the scriptures and came to believe that every believer, by virtue of his or her baptism, was

to be in ministry. Every believer was to receive the Eucharist. Every believer had the gift of the Holy Spirit to minister to others, and to study the Word.

Application: Luther spoke about the priesthood of all believers. What does today's reading say about all Christians? What is the purpose of pastors, teachers and apostles? What are God's people to be doing? Are you answering God's call? How are you using the gifts God has given you to do the work of the ministry? Are you serving God in the church? In the world?

Prayer: Great God, I pray that you would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please you. For into your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Amen.