

Nailed It!

[Text - Romans 3:19-28]

Pastor Dave Shackle
October 29, 2017

October 31, 1517, is the date that marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. On that date, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses for Church reform to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. In those days, the church *door* served as a community bulletin board - kind of like a 16th Century Blog. Luther posted his writings on All Hallows' Eve, because he knew there would be a large crowd at worship the following day, All Saints' Day. When he wrote his 95 Theses, Luther was a Roman Catholic priest and monk, and professor of New Testament at the University in Wittenberg. He hoped that posting his 95 reasons for reform would prompt an open dialogue, and perhaps bring about some much-needed changes within the Roman Catholic Church. Well, change certainly happened, though not exactly as Luther had hoped.

Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther, denounced him as a heretic, and called for him to be burned at the stake, along with all of his writings. [Not a particularly promising beginning for an open dialogue!] Luther responded by saying that the Church of Rome had become "the most licentious den of thieves, the most shameless of all brothels, the kingdom of sin, death, and hell." [Not a particularly subtle response!] Needless to say, Luther and Leo were unable to reconcile their differences; and Luther's attempt to *reform* the Church, turned into a full-blown *revolution* which would split the Church wide-open.

This weekend many churches throughout the world are commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation - as we are here, today. We do so, not to rehash old battles from the 1500's, but to focus on a crucial issue that was at the heart of that early Church reform, and which is extremely relevant to our present day Faith. It's an issue that people of Faith have wrestled with throughout the ages. And it's one which continually needs to be addressed - not only by the Church-at-large, but by all people seeking

meaning within their lives. Simply stated, it's about how we understand, relate, and respond to the One we call "God".

For Martin Luther, it all boiled-down to an awakening to *Divine Grace*. After years of study, struggle, and striving to make himself acceptable to God, Luther suddenly came to the realization that he was accepted by God because of God's Gracious Love, and not because he himself could somehow earn or deserve it. This insight came as Luther was reading Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans - a letter that he had read countless times; one that he had even taught at the University. But what changed Luther, and consequently helped change the Church, was an existential *experience* of Divine Grace. Luther describes it this way:

"My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would ever satisfy God. Therefore, I did not love a righteous and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against God. Then one night, I saw the connection between the righteousness of God and the statement that 'the righteous shall live by faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is the way by which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us through faith! Thereupon I felt that I had been reborn...."

As Luther discovered, the *realization* [the profoundly *real* experience] of Divine Grace is what moves us from a routine [and perhaps resistant] performance of religious duty, into a free and vibrant *relationship* with the Holy One. Because if our *motive* for seeking or serving God, is to somehow gain the approval of a distant, demanding deity - then even our best efforts are made hollow by our own self-serving interest. However, when you and I realize that we are completely accepted and loved by our accessible and gracious Divine Source, then our response becomes one of absolute joy! It becomes our *pleasure* to do things that are good and positive, wholesome and holy. We will *want* to serve the Holy One - by serving and caring for one another - in grateful response for what the Holy One has already done for us.

It's kind of like when you find the love of your life. From that point on, your whole life changes. You really want to be with that person - talking, listening, sharing - discovering all you can about one another. And the more you learn to trust that person's love, the more willing you become to open-up and share your true and total self. You realize that even as this other individual comes to know you as you truly are, his or her love for you doesn't waiver - it only deepens and grows. And this wonderful awareness inspires you to become the best and most complete person you can be.

For Martin Luther, his relationship with the Holy One changed when his "Faith" went from being an intellectual exercise, and became a personal experience. After years of trying to find God, Luther finally let God's Grace find him. After a lifetime of trying to pacify an angry god, Luther finally let-go and allowed the Peace of God to fill his heart. "Thereupon" Luther says, "I felt that I had been reborn!" When you and I also let go, and trust in Divine Grace, it opens us to the realization that we have been engaged by our Life-Giving Source in this same way! The Holy One - who forms us, and knows us completely - loves us with a complete and perfect love. Therefore, you and I are free to be who we truly are. And we are also empowered to become who we would truly like to be.

Most of us want to be good people. We want to be kind and considerate, positive and compassionate - at peace with ourselves and with others. The problem of getting to that point and *staying* there, is that being human means that there will be times when we stumble and regress; when we allow our selfish desires or our fears to corrupt and impede the way we interact with those around us.

The Good News that Jesus reveals, is that Our Divine Source doesn't abandon us when we stumble and fall, but lifts us up, heals our brokenness, and re-assures us of that Divine Love, so that we can get back to that place of living *gracefully*. Living as people whose lives are *filled* with Divine Grace, Love and Peace. It takes courage to trust that Divine Love and Grace can prevail against the forces of evil, hatred

and fear. It takes genuine *faith* to believe that you and I can actually make a difference in this increasingly contentious and troubling world. The Good News is, that the Church - the Living, Loving Body of Christ - has risen to this challenge in each and every generation! Today, it is *our* turn - our time to continue to renew and reform the Church, so that the love of Christ might be freely proclaimed and shared with *all* people. We may face great challenges in doing this; but the power of Divine Love and Grace remains greater still!