

So, excited about this series of Reformation based sermons? I am but I'll try to contain my excitement. Quick overview – Martin Luther was a devout Catholic who could never rid himself of the weight of his sinfulness and God's displeasure with him. In the Monastery he embarrassed the other monks with his intensity – trying to burn away sin with suffering - working 24 hours a day at menial tasks, sleeping outside in the middle of winter - but he never felt he had done enough. It was this intensity and integrity that led him to examine the policies and practices of the church, and ultimately to take issue with them.

Today we will look at the Reformation assertion that the only authority ruling the church is Scripture. Number 62 of Luther's 95 theses nailed to the door of the Wittenberg church said: "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."

Luther's reforming spirit began on his visit to Rome on behalf of his order. There he was astounded with the opulence and self-centeredness of those who should be an example of piety and humility. Rome offered way upon way to cast away sin - stairs, waters, recitation. None of these paths to salvation relieved him of the burden of his sin. He returned to his order and labored around the clock more frenetically than he had before in an effort to feel absolution. And probably because he was driving the other monks crazy, he was transferred to a smaller house of his order in Wittenberg where a wise and kindly monk sought to relieve Luther from his torture through appointing him professor of Biblical studies at Wittenberg University- the idea being to work him so hard that even if he didn't feel forgiven he would at least sleep from exhaustion.

In order for Luther to teach the students he himself had to delve into scripture. He read it in Greek and Latin, in Hebrew as best he could. For the first time he wasn't seeking relief, he was seeking to understand what scripture said so he could speak with authority to his class. Feeling the responsibility for these young souls, Luther was scrupulous about what he taught. Again and again he found scripture that contradicted the teaching of the church; again and again he could not find Biblical support for what the church taught. Even the authority of the church itself was glaringly absent.

Perhaps he could have contained himself if a financially strapped church in Rome hadn't decided to target Germany as a fertile field for selling indulgences. Cap and Trade This atrocious misuse of papal authority and exploitation of the people's ignorance and fear combined with his awareness of where scripture was being served and where it was being ignored was too much for him. He could not contain his fury. He had no choice but to point out these errors, to enlighten others to what he had discovered. He had to try to make things right.

The first and most important tenet was that the only authority in Christianity was scripture. Only scripture, and scripture only. The Roman Church found, and continues to find, authority in Holy Tradition an equal to scripture. In a face off, there was no absolute as to which would prevail. The reformers articulated that if there is a choice, there is only one choice - scripture alone has supreme authority over the church and its traditions. And, as Will preached last Sunday, each of us has equal access to the scriptures and to determining their meaning. The Roman church asserted, and asserts, that the task of interpreting the scripture has been entrusted solely to the pope and bishops in communion with him.

The priesthood of all believers empowers the people to interact with scripture without the need for a learned intervention. And, of course, that would have been a useless assertion without access to the scriptures. Luther's translation of the Bible into German, Gutenberg's invention of the printing press and the increase in literacy with the rise of the Middle Class all served to make that access a meaningful possibility.

This was a revelation to the people which unfolded over the next couple of centuries until it became so commonplace as to be invisible. Today, it would never occur to us not to read the Bible; it would never occur to a lot of us TO read the Bible. Our relationship with the Bible varies widely - for some it is a daily encounter, beginning and ending the day; for some it is sporadic - but beloved when we meet it again; for some the Bible is a reference book, teaching and training in righteousness as Paul wrote to Timothy; some find the Bible beautiful poetry, others find it filled with eternal myths; many of us know the desire and the challenge involved in seeking absolute truth in the Bible. Maybe you know, too, that the Bible has been copied by many hands, and translated from and to a myriad of languages. Maybe you know the Bible is the word of God, as I do, without knowing exactly what that means.

It wasn't long after reformers embraced the Bible as the only authority that dissention resurfaced and a new denomination was formed. We agree on the place of the Bible - we do not agree on what it says and why it is saying it.

Calvin made it clear that those gathered around scripture are the church rather than a church being the entity to preside over scripture. We are a church because this book is in the pews, and in our offices, and scattered around the building. We are a church because we put this at the center of our worship. We are a church because together we try to discern scripture's meaning, and together we try to live as scripture tells us.

There is something, though, maybe I've seen too many movies or tv representations of preachers holding the Bible up and shaking it at the congregation like a pointing finger, something that tells us if we make the Bible the central authority in our lives, all individual choice is gone, all joy is repressed, all personal interaction with the earth, with nature, must be serious and solemn.

I confess that I was feeling a little of this as I wrote until I stumbled upon a small quote from Martin Luther in response to an accolade.

Luther said: I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached and wrote God's word, otherwise I did nothing - while I slept or drank beer with Philip and Amsdorf the word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the word did everything.

And his lightness reminded me of all the beauty and joy and wisdom contained in the Bible, so I to remind you of that, lest you are one of us who paint the whole book with a broad brush, a broad brush with black paint. But to the contrary Genesis tells us God's covenant with every living creature is represented by a rainbow, a splash of color, across the sky.

The Psalmist tells us weeping may linger for the night, but that joy comes in the morning.

We hear that God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. and there was evening and there was morning the sixth day.

Jesus tells us, "do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."

There is celebration: David and all Israel were **dancing** before God with all their might, with song and lyres and harps and tambourines and cymbals and trumpets.

There is poetry and promise: For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you

shall burst into song,

and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

**13** Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;

instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;

and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,

for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

There is guidance and clarity: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' **45** Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

There is forgiveness: For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime.

There is humor: some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) <sup>19</sup> So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." <sup>21</sup> Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup> For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'

There is instruction:

you shall love the Lord **your** God **with all your** heart, and **with all your**soul, and **with all your** mind, and **with all your** strength.'