

Reformation Day Sunday, October 31, 2010

GOSPEL: John 8:31-36

31 Then Jesus said to *his fellow Galileans and Judeans* who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” 33 They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

34 Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

³¹ Ἐλεγεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πρὸς τοὺς πεπιστευκότας αὐτῷ Ἰουδαίους, Ἐὰν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ, ἀληθῶς μαθηταὶ μου ἐστε, ³² καὶ γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς. ³³ ἀπεκρίθησαν πρὸς αὐτόν, Σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ ἐσμεν καὶ οὐδενὶ δεδουλεύκαμεν πώποτε: πῶς σὺ λέγεις ὅτι Ἐλεύθεροι γενήσεσθε; ³⁴ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν δοῦλός ἐστιν τῆς ἁμαρτίας. ³⁵ ὁ δὲ δοῦλος οὐ μένει ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα: ὁ υἱὸς μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ³⁶ ἐὰν οὖν ὁ υἱὸς ὑμᾶς ἐλευθερώσῃ, ὄντως ἐλεύθεροι ἔσεσθε.

The Truth

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

Grace to you and peace in the name of God who calls each of us to the Truth. **Amen.**

Four hundred and ninety-three years ago, Martin Luther, monastic and priest of the Augustinian Order, professor of Theology at the University in Wittenberg, Germany published his *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* ... what we know as the “95 Theses”. The legend that he walked the 750 steps it took to go from the eastern end of that Medieval city and the Augustinian Monastery in which he lived ... to the Castle Church down the street at the western end of the city (called the *Castle Church* because it was ((and still is)) attached to the Castle of Frederick III, Elector of Saxony ... walked down the street took a hammer and tacked up on the wooden doors of that church his 95 Theses and started the Reformation of the Church ... the legend is ... more or less ... true.

Luther did pen 95 propositions for debate about the sale of Indulgences in particular (the money-making scheme endorsed by Leo X, Pope in Rome, to raise funds for the restoration and refurbishing of the Basilica of St. Peter) and the whole notion that some church authority or council other than God could grant salvation to an individual in general ... Luther did write down these words in Latin ... on paper ... and did want to see them posted publicly ... and did want to have an open theological and academic debate ... and was indeed taking a rather dangerous step against the “powers that be” who were bullying the people into believing that the church and only



the church had the Truth and the Truth said that the church and only the church had the authority to forgive and this could be effected more easily by purchasing with one's hard earned income a piece of paper that said so ...

... but Luther most likely had one of his students walk down the street, who perhaps took his time strolling along the banks of Elbe River just a hundred yards to the left, and post on the wooden doors of the church what Luther had written.

[The doors, by the way, were burned in a fire sometime in the past, and are today cast in bronze ... they look very much like the bronze doors of the Cathedral here in Santa Fe – except that on the *Schlosskirche em Wittenberg* those bronze doors bear not the history of the Church in New Mexico, but the 95 Theses themselves ... in Latin ... and they are not located at the main entrance to the church nave which is actually right next to the Castle itself, but about half up, rather in the middle of the Nave ... and they are only opened on Sunday mornings ... *after* the Service.]

And that part of the legend that Luther began the Reformation is also on the edge of things ... because the idea of change in the church, of the church to be more like the body of its Christ, the reshaping and remolding and reassembling of the dissident parts of that body ... had been in the mix for a long, long time ... One should go back and read the stories of John Wycliffe in England and Jan Hus in Prague, Luther's spiritual predecessors.

The fire of change had been smoldering for many, many years ... Luther threw gasoline upon the embers.

Facing the Giant of Rome, facing the Bully, Luther knew that he most likely would end up like Hus (who was burned at the stake as a heretic) or Wycliffe (whose bones were exhumed long after his death, burned into ashes, and thrown into the Thames River ... as a heretic) ... that's the way bullies act, invoking power and fear just to get their way.

That was 503 years ago. One week ago I was having brunch with my friend Tom Cahill, the writer, whose latest book in his "hinges of history" is still in the works ... it's about the Reformation ... and it's taking a while because of Tom's careful research and wonderful writing style ... and because as he mentioned ... "It's hard. It's a time of everyone pointing the finger at each other and shaking that finger in anger."

We have the truth ...

No, *we* have the truth ...

No, **we** have the truth ...

And one way of making sure that the truth is on your side is to be the bully.

Sitting there in the Galaxy Diner on 9th and 46th in Manhattan ... having worshiped at St. Luke's – another Reconciling in Christ congregation of the ELCA ... and pondering the Reformation and its history and its results ... I was aware that though distant from its *beginning* four centuries before, and distant from its starting ground across an ocean ... I was not that far in time nor space from the recent actions of some bullies who believing they have the truth and right on their side resulted in Tyler Clementi jumping to his death from the George Washington Bridge only 4 weeks before ... and his suicide joined by other young people who have taken their own lives.

A study by the Suicide Prevention Center shows lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are between roughly 1.5 and 7 times more likely than heterosexual youth to have reported attempting suicide.

Leigh Powers, head of Information Services at the Suicide Prevention Resource Center has said, "Being lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender is not a risk factor for suicide," ... "Actually, it is the social stigma and discrimination that LGBT youth experience that results in feelings and behaviors which are, in turn, associated with suicidal behavior."

And we know that some prominent American Evangelists have done more than their share to throw the fuel of their *Christian truth* onto the stigma and the discrimination. While most thinking people do not regard the "proclamations" of Pat Robertson as the Truth ... that Christians have the right to rule non-Christians or that the attack on 9/11 happened because "America had embraced feminism, made abortion legal in limited situations, was accepting of homosexuality and tolerated in our freedom such organizations as the American Civil Liberties Union."¹ ... while most thinking believers do not hold to that hate ... the bullying happens, the fear spreads, the Truth is distorted ... and gay teens jump to their death.

Why? Why is it that some feel the right to take over the lives and rights of others? ... all in the name of religious Truth.

Luther in the 16th Century realized that he was facing possible execution by the Bully of his time ... except that he knew he had a greater weapon on his side ... he called it, we call it, the *Gospel* ... not the hammer of judgment, but the certainty of God's love that everyone is a child of God ... created as we are ... intended as we are ... to live and love God and one another ... to protect and preserve the rights of each other ... to hold up and embrace the beauty of each other.

It's in the words Luther wrote of the final hymn we will sing today ...

Were they to take our house,
goods, honor, child, or spouse,
though life be wrenched away,
they cannot win the day.
The kingdom's ours forever.

The pain of the world, and those who dwell therein is met by the love of Jesus ... that's our gospel, that's what we believe.

"Jesus continues to show us that he – not those who would oppress and exclude – is the final Word on who belongs in Christian community."

Rev. Bridgette Young, the senior associate dean of the chapel and religious life at Emory University in Atlanta puts it this way, "Jesus continues to show us that he – not those who would oppress and exclude – is the final Word on who belongs in Christian community."²

Luther posted his Articles for Debate on the door of the Castle Church in 1517 ... and just last week our Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson (the first Bishop to do so) published a video message to

¹ Taken from a recent essay by Bp. John Shelby Spong entitled "An Open Letter to Political Leader Newt Gingrich"

² From OUT IN SCRIPTURE, available on the Internet; this week's edition.

lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth entitled “You are a Beloved Child of God” ... posting it on the modern version of the Wittenberg Door ... <http://www.itgetsbetterproject.com/> ...the place where he joins so many others who are making their visible statements public to tell teens and young adults that taking their own lives as a defense against bullying is not the answer ... and the stigma and fear imposed by some is not the Truth and that we are here to love, support, and help.

That is our message here as well, on this Reformation Day ... it does not mean celebrating a day in the life of Martin Luther, nor arguing about a Doctrine, ... it does mean the living out of the truth of God’s love for all people, for everyone.

“... they cannot win the day, the kingdom’s ours forever.”

Let us pray.

Faithful and Just God, We thank you for the opportunity to live as a vision of justice and hope. Allow our commitment to what is right encourage others to do the same. Give us the strength to step away from norms that hurt, degrade and oppress and guide us in discovering fresh and faithful ways of being in the world. Help us to be life givers and not life takers. Help us to build hope and purpose where there is none and to stay mindful that regardless of our status and circumstance we can be the catalyst for change in this world. **Amen.**

*Deo Gratias (+)
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