

Reformation Series
Peace, Seattle
October 29, 2017
Ephesians 2:4-10, John 8:31-36

SALVATION – NOT FOR SALE

The door of the church in that university town functioned like a community bulletin board. It was the place to go to find out what was happening in town: visiting lecturers, upcoming concerts, debates by doctoral students—you could even find work by local poets posted there.¹

So when professor Martin Luther posted a document in Latin on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, he was doing nothing extraordinary—he was simply following a practice repeated by many others both before him and after him. He was calling attention to issues he thought deserved public debate.

No, it wasn't the WAY he posted his arguments that sent waves rippling out from Wittenberg—it was the CONTENT of those 95 theses.

Luther challenged his church and pope on the practice that had become commonplace in the medieval church; the practice of selling indulgences—a kind of ecclesiastical coupon—which guaranteed its owners reduced time in purgatory for themselves or their deceased loved ones.

Though in theory the church wasn't SELLING SALVATION, in practice the sale of indulgences gave the impression that the church could put salvation on the market.² And the fact that the money raised from these sales was designated for a massive Vatican building project further muddied the waters.

The upshot? Luther felt compelled to list 95 ways in which SALVATION IS NOT FOR SALE.

Two months after he wrote his Theses, they were translated from Latin into German. Within two weeks copies had spread throughout Germany, and within two months, they'd spread throughout Europe.

But what was it that made this movement—which began as a trickle—become a flood? What were the “hidden springs of imagination, high up in the hills, that were to feed the broad river of the Reformation?”³

According to Peter Matheson, it was the flowering of new images, allegories and metaphors for the divine and the human—metaphors taken from a reanimated reading of the Bible—that subverted the world which the Reformers inherited and paved the way for a new one.

“When your metaphors change,” writes Matheson, “your world changes with them.”⁴

These four weeks we've spent less time looking back in history, and more time looking at our contemporary world and asking where God's liberating grace must still be channeled in order to free those who are bound.

¹ Excerpted from Timothy Wengert's chapter on the 95 Theses in *The Annotated Luther: The Roots of Reform. Volume 1*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015)

² LWF, Don Obberdorfer

³ Peter Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 4

⁴ Ibid.

What we've been about is not so much creating new metaphors as discovering the ways which GOD'S LIBERATING GRACE addresses the world's needs TODAY.

HUMAN BEINGS—NOT FOR SALE; CREATION—NOT FOR SALE; SALVATION—NOT FOR SALE; these claims are counterpoints to urgent realities we're facing right now—realities with social and economic and environmental dimensions, as well as spiritual ones.

As followers of Christ, our calling is not to promote an understanding of salvation that narrows the definition to purely spiritual concerns. On the contrary our task is to lift up all the ways in which salvation as free gift—God's unconditional YES! to us—brings freedom to all the spheres of our lives—from the PERSONAL to the COMMUNAL; from the PAROCHIAL to the GLOBAL.

In her book, **LEAVING CHURCH**, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

Salvation is so much more than many of its proponents would have us believe. In the Bible, human beings experience God's salvation when peace ends war, when food follows famine, when health supplants sickness and freedom trumps oppression.

Salvation is a word for the divine spaciousness that comes to human beings in all the tight places where their lives are at risk, regardless of how they got there or whether they know God's name.

Sometimes it comes as an extended human hand and sometimes as a bolt from the blue, but either way it opens a door in what looked for all the world like a wall.

This is the way of life, and God alone knows how it works.⁵

What Taylor says with different language, is what Paul writes about in the second chapter of Ephesians: that the God we meet in Jesus, rich in mercy and kindness, who loves us even when we are unlovable, has opened up a space for a grace which knows no bounds.

We see this divine spaciousness reflected in Jesus' life:

- in how he carried himself in the world;
- in the way he cleared room so others could experience that spaciousness, too, and the freedom that comes with it;
- in the way he gathered all our tight places—and the tightest one of all, death itself—unto himself on the cross.

His Way was a tough sell to those who were so heavily invested in their own systems for achieving security. And truth be told, we're all in that business.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells those who had begun putting their trust in him,

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Their first response to him is "US? WE'VE NEVER BEEN SLAVES TO ANYONE!"

Talk about revisionist history! Never been enslaved?

- What about Pharaoh's Egypt? What about Assyria? And Babylon?
- AND WHAT ABOUT THE ROMANS WHO ARE EXERTING CONTROL OVER YOU RIGHT NOW?

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*. San Francisco: Harper, © 2007, BBT. Pp.225-226.

The plain truth is, the children of Abraham had been enslaved not once, not twice, but many times over.

When these Jewish leaders responded to Jesus' offer to make them FREE INDEED, with the claim, WE HAVE NEVER BEEN SLAVES TO ANY ONE, they were construing the Scriptures to fit their notion of their special place, which had come to be institutionally supported.

It's this very sort of systemic blindness that Jesus is pointing to when he says, EVERYONE WHO COMMITS SIN IS A SLAVE TO SIN.

Of course, this kind of denial isn't unique to them. We each have our own peculiar forms of denial, both personally and nationally.

As a nation, our denial has to do with slavery and racism; with the subjugation of indigenous peoples; with our justifications for war.

Instead of claiming: WE HAVE NEVER BEEN SLAVES TO ANYONE, our refrain would be: WE HAVE NEVER OPPRESSED ANYONE.

And oppression, too, is a form of slavery. And denying that we have a problem—whether on a national or a personal level—solves nothing. It only makes the bitter harvest from those painful realities worse, and postpones the possibility of reconciliation, of forgiveness, healing, and renewed relationships.

Before we can participate in the freedom God offers us in Jesus, we must own the fact that we are far from free; that there are forces at work within and around us that are working to keep us tightly bound.

The freedom from “sin, death, and the devil” that Luther understood as pure gift of God—unmerited and unachievable—compelled him to preach Word alone, Faith alone, Grace alone, and this insight has served as a touchstone for the Lutheran movement for five centuries.

But the danger inherent in any historical movement is that overtime the images and metaphors that once served as a fresh, invigorating wind, awakening the senses and animating the imaginations of a generation, can become immovable truths, fixed in stone; can become, in other words, fossilized.

The invitation for us, then, at this 500th anniversary mark, is not only to ask what images animated Brother Martin and other 16th century Reformers, but what images and metaphors can animate us and the church of this day, carrying the momentum forward so that the church does not become a museum relic of the past.

This is why the REFORMATION we mark today will always be unfinished business. The divine spaciousness that comes to us in all the tight places of our lives finds purchase precisely at that point where it separates us from our personal and national myths about security or self-sufficiency or entitlement.

In the words of Walter Brueggemann, “The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from you by the grace of God.” This, my friends, is Good News.

SALVATION IS NOT FOR SALE! It is gift. And that's not the end of the story but the beginning!

“For we are what God has made us—created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand to be our way of life.”

At Font and Table, in water, wine, and wheat, we experience God's call again and again: to take as our own and share with the world the boundless, liberating grace God offers the world in Jesus.

May it be so! Amen.