

Christ Episcopal Church
Dayton, Ohio
Reformation Sunday/Proper 25B
October 25, 2009

In the wider Protestant tradition the last Sunday of October is observed as Reformation Sunday. It commemorates the day—the 31st of October, 1517—when Martin Luther affixed his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral.

There were many forces at work that brought about the Reformation. But the presenting issue for Martin Luther—the straw that broke the camel’s back, if you will, was the sale of indulgences by the papal representative in the German states, Johann Tetzel. An *indulgence* was a free pass from performing whatever penances a person might have been given in order to obtain forgiveness of sins.

For example, you might go into the confessional to confess, and then be given a penance—if you said a certain number of Hail Mary’s and Our Father’s and, perhaps, apologized to your mother, you’d be absolved of your transgression. But if you possessed an indulgence, you didn’t have to perform the penance and your mother never had to know.

It was during the 16th century that the popes were engaged in expensive renovations to St. Peter’s Basilica and the Sistine Chapel. It was the time of Michelangelo. The sale of Indulgences was used as a fund-raising mechanism for the Vatican’s Capital Improvement Fund.

In the hands of a Johann Tetzel, priests were told to issue impossible penances to the wealthy (for example, learn Greek and read the entire Bible in Greek). Many of these folk were nearly illiterate, and so they were moved to purchase one of Tetzel’s indulgences for an exorbitant sum of money.

Luther, an Augustinian monk and professor of New Testament, was a tortured soul who did every penance and even tried self-inflicted suffering and pain to rid himself of overwhelming guilt for the most minor of infractions. But despite all of his efforts, he never felt clean and righteous and worthy of the love of God.

In preparation for teaching a class on the *Epistle to the Romans*, Luther, read in his Bible, Romans 5:1-2: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to his grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”

That passage caused a revolution in both Luther’s soul and in his understanding. We’re justified, we’re at peace with God, not by our works, not by our own efforts, as wonderful as they may be, but by trust in God who saves us by his free gift . . . the gift we call grace.

Tetzel and his indulgences represented to Luther the very worst of the old understanding that it's up to each of us to achieve our own salvation, even if we have to buy it. We're at peace with God, he claimed, because God desires it, and God gives it to us freely. So Luther devised 95 theses against indulgences for debate in his classes and posted them on what amounted to the University of Wittenberg's bulletin board. And the Reformation was off and running.

What needs to be emphasized here is that although there may not always be a Johann Tetzel character around, the deeper meaning of the Reformation was a tremendous paradigm shift. Tetzel's sale of indulgences was built on a hierarchical model of church. I relate to God through the sacraments, mediated through the priest, who relates to the bishop, who goes through the archbishop and cardinals, who are connected to the Pope who is the only one who has direct access to Jesus.

It's a system of control of thought and behavior by the threat of ex-communication. If you cannot be forgiven (because you've not performed your penance or obtained an indulgence—or if you cannot have access to the other sacraments) then you, in effect, have been cut off from God.

The new paradigm introduced by the reformers can be summed up in the phrase, “the priesthood of all believers.” Here is radical egalitarianism. Everyone has access to Jesus! No hierarchy stands between you and your Lord. You are a priest, just as I am a priest.

The first thing the reformers did was to dismantle the old paradigm.

- They translated the scriptures into the language spoken by the people.
- Then they started worshipping in the vernacular rather than in Latin.
- The sacraments became windows into the presence of God rather than doors that could be closed to keep one outside the community of faith.
- The pope became simply the Bishop of Rome and not the keeper of the only keys into the kingdom of God.
- And on these shores, even our bishops are elected—where lay votes carry as much weight as clergy votes.

A fresh breeze of the Holy Spirit blew through the crusty old church and created new life!

As (Jesus) and his disciples were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’

Bartimaeus is discouraged from seeking Jesus . . . from getting to Jesus. The in-crowd see it as their duty to protect him. But the cry of the blind man breaks through to Jesus, “Have mercy on me!”

“Have mercy,” is the cry of all people who want to be in touch with God. The Bible’s full of folk, from all walks of life—Kings, generals, centurions, governors, sinners, priests, outcasts, prophets, beggars, lepers—all seeking to get close to God, to be blessed, to experience the mercy of God.

Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he’s calling you.’ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.”

This past week the Vatican published new guidelines for welcoming Anglican clergy, parishes, even dioceses back into the Roman Catholic hierarchical fold. The Apostolic Constitution was amended by Pope Benedict XVI to lay out the details of how this could happen.

Commenting on this, the Archbishop of Westminster (the chief Roman Catholic prelate in England) and Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, wrote:

The Apostolic Constitution is further recognition of the substantial overlap in faith, doctrine and spirituality between the Catholic Church and the Anglican tradition. Without the dialogues of the past forty years, this recognition would not have been possible, nor would hopes for full visible unity have been nurtured. In this sense, this Apostolic Constitution is one consequence of ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.¹

I certainly hope that Dr. Williams is wrong, because there are still too many hierarchs trying to place themselves between those who cry for mercy and their access to God. No great desire for unity, no ecumenical dialogue, no Apostolic Constitution, no commissions or conferences have the right or the authority, in the words of the Gospel of Mark, to “sternly order (them) to be quiet.”

Recently, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Cincinnati silenced a nun, a teacher, for even raising the issue of the ordination of women, many of whom are begging, “Lord, have mercy.” The Pope has recently silenced the voices of liberation theologians in Central America who echo the cries of the oppressed, the disappeared, the weak, and the starving.

Asking for mercy are women who are banned from using birth control. Men and women who are homosexual, bi-sexual, or transgendered cry for mercy, for the love of God, for opportunities to serve Christ in the church. Unity at this point in history would mean the de-frocking of Anglican women, priests and bishops, including our

¹ *Joint Statement by the Archbishop of Westminster and the Archbishop of Canterbury*, released on October 20, 2009. Accessed on October 24, 2009, 1:47 pm at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2009/10/20/ACNS4662>

own Presiding Bishop. Unity would require abandoning the Reformation paradigm and returning to the model of multiple barriers erected between Jesus and us.

As Bishop Spong has said, "Church unity can never be a virtue that is preserved by allowing injustice, oppression and psychological tyranny to go unchallenged."²

We had a Reformation for a reason. It was a gift of the Holy Spirit. We must not give in to the voices of repression and control.

Jesus, hearing the cries for mercy, says: "Call him here." Let the women come to me. Let the children through. Open the doors. "Come unto me, all who travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you."

The words on the Church sign should never say, "Be quiet! Stay away!" Two words conspicuously absent from the sign are "except" and "unless." For us children of the Reformation, the word on the sign and in our practice is simply and profoundly, "Welcome!"

² John Spong, *A Manifesto! The Time Has Come!* Issued October 15, 2009.

