
The Reformation: 503 years and counting
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 3:19-28 and John 8:31-36

Do we ever stop celebrating in this church? Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday. I must confess I'm a bit conflicted today. Because I can't decide if Reformation Sunday is about our past, or our present. I'm hoping that you can help me decide over coffee time today. But I suppose I should stick with tradition and at least begin this reflection ... in the past.

[SLIDE: gargolye]

500 years, ago, many people were very superstitious, and lived lives that were brutish and short. So naturally, people had a deep interest in salvation and the afterlife. If your life is terrible and you can't make it better, it makes sense to hope for some form of heaven. In the western world, the church had all the answers for people concerning salvation and the afterlife. At the time, the church had over 1000 years of tradition to fall back on. It was a system that worked for many people. But the system did not work for everybody.

[SLIDE: luther]

One person it did not work for was a German monk, priest, and theologian named Martin Luther. Luther was a dedicated Christian priest, but he was plagued by doubts about his own salvation. To understanding salvation better, he looked to the Bible to add to what he already knew as a priest. And he found things in the Bible he could not reconcile with what the church was teaching. The short version of that story is that Luther stated his concerns to the church, he was de-monked, and went on to start his own church. But that version of the story is far too simplistic - and boring.

Let's backtrack and consider what problem the church was solving for people. People wanted salvation. And the church helped them get just that. On that level, the system worked just fine. The Roman Catholic solution involved confessing your sins to a priest, taking mass, and visiting sacred relics and places. These activities were collectively known as "works". If you did these works, then after you died you would go

to heaven. That sounds simple enough. But in fact only saintly people would take that path. For the rest of us, there was a different process.

[SLIDE: purgatory - system]

Non-saintly people, that is, most people, when they died would not go directly to heaven - they went to “purgatory”. Purgatory was a place where a person's evil nature would be burned away, to make them “good enough” to go to heaven. Purgatory was not a fun place - it was like hell, except that you got out eventually. And “eventually” was the word. According to some sources, a typical person might expect to spend 10,000-20,000 years in purgatory before they graduated to heaven.

[SLIDE: purgatory painting]

As an aside - I have to tell you, the idea of purgatory makes sense to me. In the United Church we think that people go to heaven without cleansing our evil natures first. But if that's the case, why do we expect heaven to be better - or even different - from life on earth? I have some personal baggage I want to get rid of. There is something very sensible about the concept of purgatory.

However, we might be discouraged at the idea of spending 10's of thousands of years in purgatory. But the church had a solution for that too. There were enough saints who had died that there was a surplus of God's grace. The Pope had the power to dispense this grace to ease people through purgatory faster. And how did you get the Pope to dispense some of this grace to help you (or perhaps one of your dead relatives) get through purgatory faster? Simple. You purchased what was called an “indulgence”.

Now I know what you are thinking. You like indulgences yourself. You buy them all the time. Perhaps you are thinking about something like this?

[SLIDE: indulgence 1]

Sure, but I mean something like this:

[SLIDE: indulgence 2]

Indulgences were the ultimate “get out of jail free” card. Except that it was get out of purgatory for a fee. Martin Luther had a big problem with that system because almost none of what I have just said in the last couple of minutes is in the Bible. But you might be surprised to learn what Luther's *big* concern was, because it's not what you might

have been taught. And I'll return to that later. We usually say that Luther's problem was that the church was collecting money inappropriately. And that certainly was happening. And indulgences gave wealthy people an advantage, which doesn't sound very fair. Wealthy people have all the advantages on earth. Why would we want that to continue in the afterlife?

I'm sure you know the rest. Luther found a wide variety of discrepancies between church teachings and what was in the Bible. This caused many other questions to be asked. In the end (which we now see as a beginning), Luther created 95 statements of faith that he believed. And he challenged others to debate him on these 95 points. These points are found in a document, called "The 95 Theses" which opens with these words, "Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place."¹

[SLIDE - nailing]

He nailed the 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. The theses themselves are an interesting mix of ideas. Some were aimed directly at the church. #5 declares that the pope does not have the authority to dispense grace in the way that indulgences assumed. But other theses seem more personal and reflective. #62 states: the true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God. #63 follows with: But this treasure is naturally most odious, for it makes the first to be last (Mt. 20:16). Luther wanted the church to be subordinate to the Bible, but Luther was not blind to the most challenging aspects of the gospels.

Luther posted the theses in Latin, so that priests and other educated people could debate them. This action of nailing the theses to the door of the church is what we commemorate today. That event was 503 years ago this coming Saturday. The action is symbolic of the entire Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was the work of many people in many countries, over many years. But Luther nailing the 95 theses to the church door is the seen as the kick-off for the Reformation.

[SLIDE: nailed it!]

¹ <https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>

What can I say? “He nailed it!”

Usually when we tell the story of the Protestant Reformation, we stop right here. We declare that indulgences, and the pope were evil, and we congratulate ourselves for being Protestant. Or more accurately we congratulate ourselves for NOT being catholic, and we go for coffee. Sorry. It’s not coffee time yet. Besides, if we went for coffee now we would miss the best part of the story.

Here's what - for me at least - is the most interesting part of the story. Luther's initial objection to indulgences had nothing to do with the pope, or with money. His concerns were actually pastoral. Remember, Luther was a practicing priest who cared for his flock. Here's the part of the story we don't usually hear.

Luther would sometimes run into people on the street. And he would sometimes (in a loving way I’m sure) point out that he had not seen them in church recently. And increasingly, Luther was meeting people who told him that they had bought an indulgence and therefore - in their minds - no longer needed the church. Owning a “get out of jail” card was leading some people to ignore the church. Even worse, the “get out of jail” card was leading some people to ignore their own faith. Even worse, owning an indulgence was considered - by some people - a license to sin liberally.

[slide: carbon offset]

Indulgences were seen by some people like we see carbon offsets today. As long as you pay cash, you can keep sinning. If we can put our minds back 500 years, this makes sense. If salvation only means going to heaven. And if you already have an indulgence that guarantees that you will get there. Then why not indulge in immoral behaviour for the rest of your life? That was the thinking anyway.

Luther brought the issue of indulgences up with his superiors initially not because of the twisted theology or the lack of biblical basis. Luther was worried about the salvation of his people if they gave up their faith. Because to Luther, the point of faith was not only to go to heaven. The point of faith was to live a life of faith, and indulgences were causing some people to abandon their faith.

Luther was worried that bad theology was detrimental to his flock and to their faith. Luther's primary concern was pastoral.

Luther believed that we are saved by faith, but a thoughtful faith, a reflective faith, a faith that leads to action. And let's not gloss over this idea of "thoughtful faith" too quickly.

[SLIDE - no thinking]

500 years ago, the church told you what to believe. Thought was not required!

People before Luther had been burned at the stake for thinking in church. Thinking was considered very dangerous. Trust me, as a scientist who is also a minister I know just how much - and how little - tolerance the church has for people who think.

This is summarized nicely in this quote:

[SLIDE: science and religion]

"science is about questions that can't be answered and religion is about answers that can't be questioned." Christianity has not always worked well for people who think about their faith.

And this is perhaps what really got Luther kicked out. He wanted people to think about their own faith. Luther translated the Bible into German so that common people could read it. Luther encouraged people to use their God-given brains, and to think for themselves about their faith.

[slide: shuc-beliefs]

I'm reminded of a conversation that happened in Fellowship Hall almost exactly 1 year ago. I was being interviewed by your search committee. I was interviewing them too of course. And I asked about something on your web site that stated "Sydenham-Heritage United Church is progressive Christian faith community" I was particularly interested in knowing what your search committee thought "Progressive Christianity" meant. And how it was lived out here at SHUC. I had to figure out if my theology and approach to preaching would be well-received here or not.

To be honest, I've forgotten what the search committee said. But I know that I would not be here today if they had not said some things that I resonated with. But no fear, this week I asked Joan McSpadden what Progressive Christianity means to her.

Joan shared with me 2 aspects of Progressive Christianity. One aspect is about our own liberation from ideas that are holding us back. To be liberated from ancient doctrines

that no longer make sense. To be set free to use our God-given brains to think about our own faith. To be free to name and explore our own doubts, to ask questions, and to be ok, whether or not we find answers to those questions.

The other aspect is to not only be liberated from our past, but to be liberated for our present - and our future. To see faith as a lifelong journey into a new way of life and living. To freely explore new ideas. To live a life of trust, love, and peace.

And all of this anchored in the experience of a God of love as we see in Jesus.

Joan, I hope I did justice to what you told me. But I was struck by Joan's words. And by the fact that Luther said the same thing - in his own context of course. Earlier I said that Luther was worried that bad theology was detrimental to his flock and to their faith. Luther's primary concern was pastoral. That sound a lot like what Joan told me. It sounds a lot like what brought me here to SHUC. Reformation Sunday reminds us that we are liberated *from* our past. But also that we are liberated *for* our present. You know, that present that becomes our future?

[slide: super-luther]

Luther's superpower was that he cared for his flock and thought about his faith.

And that's why I say that the Reformation is not only about our past. The Reformation is also about our present. We have that same superpower. And if you want to celebrate your Protestant roots, go home, read your Bible, and reflect on your faith. Yes, you have every right to expect a Bible-based, thoughtful sermon here once a week. But you are also responsible for your own faith. And by the way, I don't have any of those "get out of jail" cards to hand out anyway.

We continue to be liberated from our past. As Luther and Joan said in different ways, for pastoral reasons, here at SHUC we work to liberate people from bad theology that is detrimental to the flock. That's not something that happened once 503 years ago. That is something we are invited to do every day.

The only question is, now that you have been liberated, what will you do with your freedom?

Amen.