

Reformation Sunday – October 29, 2017
Text: Rom. 3:19-28
Theme: Do Not Indulge Me

In 2 days it will be 500 years since Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, setting off what we now call the Protestant Reformation. Some say that the nailing of the theses was legendary drama and he actually only sent a letter to superiors but nevertheless, however he disseminated his theses, he had no idea of what he was really setting in motion. Luther felt deeply that something must be done to curb the abuses around the sale of indulgences and he took action in the normal way academics do it. He sought to have a larger discussion.

Indulgences, you probably remember, were letters from the Pope forgiving penance for sins and reducing the time you or a loved one must spend in purgatory before entering heaven. They were sold to people in order to raise money for various ventures in the Church. The earliest use of them was by Pope Urban II in 1095 when he offered full remission of penance for all who agreed to serve in the Crusades. What is penance? Penance is working off your sin. Remember when you had to mow 20 lawns to pay for the neighbor's window you broke with that errant pop fly from the backyard? Maybe that was just me and not you, but that was penance. The Church was teaching that all sins had to have

appropriate work connected to them in order to be forgiven. Of course, we know from the Bible that forgiveness is free and working for forgiveness devalues the work of Christ on the cross. But people in Luther's day could not read the Bible because either it was in Latin or they were illiterate or both. And corrupt leaders took advantage of that.

So, if you stole an apple, you confessed your sin to the priest and he prescribed penance, which might be to reimburse the shop owner double and beg his forgiveness, say 10 Hail Mary's and 10 Our Fathers and give some money to the Church. After you did that, absolution would be granted. Well you can see that this started out as a salutary even if misguided ambition. We all agree that righting your wrong is a good thing. However, what if you forgot all about stealing the apple and never even confessed it? What if you only thought about stealing the apple but did not have the opportunity? Or worse, what if you thought of robbing the shop keeper or killing him? Sin is sin in thought, word or deed. What penance can you do to get forgiveness for all of that sin? Well, maybe you could just give more money to the Church and say some prescribed prayers and the priest would call it good. As soon as the Church allowed the grace of God to be bought and sold, human beings saw dollar signs and jumped in with both feet. By Luther's time, Leo X wanted to

build St. Peter's Basilica and he saw the sale of indulgences as the way to finance it. But wait, we all know from the history of the McDonalds Corporation that franchising is the way to make really big bucks.

Enter the indulgence preachers who, being paid a percentage of what they sold, would carry the indulgences throughout the Holy Roman Empire and the more they sold, the more they made. In Wittenberg, John Tetzel came selling indulgences and met up with an unknown monk by the name of Martin Luther. Luther did what he could do. He wrote down truths from Scripture and disseminated them to see what kind of discussion among the academic community he could muster. Surely, if the doctors of the Church were to unite in their outcry over the abuses being committed in Germany, the Holy Father in Rome would hear them and address this horrible abuse. Luther had no idea, at the time, that it was the Holy Father and his minions who were behind these abuses.

St. Paul tells us in Romans that the Law speaks to those who are under the Law. In his time, he was talking about the Jews. In our time there are many more living under the weight of the Law besides Jews: Hindus, Muslims, Atheists and Agnostics, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and quite a number of misguided and misinformed Christians. The list goes on and on. Anyone who

believes that their temporal or eternal well-being is, in any way, up to them, lives under the Law. If I'm a Muslim, I believe that I must perform prayers, almsgiving and pilgrimages in order to insure my salvation. If I am an atheist, I believe that my only salvation is whatever I am living right now, so I have to be cunning and crafty to succeed in this world in whatever way I deem success in order to have the best life possible because this is all you get. If I am a Primitive Baptist, I believe in the grace of God but I have to live a strictly moral life and make few mistakes along the way if I am to be worthy and inherit that grace. Every manmade system of religion is under the Law in some way because they all include what a person must do to be saved in whatever way they define salvation.

Paul goes on to say that all who have faith in Christ receive salvation as a free gift. Faith is given to us through the Word and through Baptism. Having been given faith, we have what it takes to grasp ahold of salvation. Any good works that we do in this life are not to secure forgiveness. They are not to secure salvation. They are only the natural byproduct of faith. It is just what the one who has been given forgiveness and salvation does. "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

What Luther said with 95 theses, I say somewhat more succinctly today. Anyone who teaches people that they must do

anything in order to be forgiven is blaspheming Christ. What sin can you possibly commit that he did not pay for with his life and his soul on the cross? What sin? What sin is greater than the very son of God? There is none. All of our sin has been forgiven and continues being forgiven as our Baptismal waters wash over us moment by moment and we receive the very body and blood of the one who paid for all of our sin.

But be on guard! Do not fear sin or hell, but remember that Satan never stops trying to mislead you and confuse you. When you are tempted to say, "yeah, but you can't just sin and sin and still go to heaven," remember St. Paul's words, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." When you are tempted to say that in order to be saved you at least have to accept Jesus, remember St. Paul's words. "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." Never let Satan trick you into believing that there is any work to be done in order to be forgiven and saved. The work is finished. The gift is ours. Our victory has been won. The Kingdom ours remaineth.