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Elmer Presbyterian Church
Reformation Sunday
October 31, 2021
Scripture: Hebrews 11: 1-34

Sermon: Past, Present and Future

It was a cool October 31, 1517, 504 years ago today, the priest, Martin Luther, defiantly nailed his protest notice to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. These ***Ninety-five Theses*** were a list of abuses and errors that he understood were a corruption of the purpose and mission of the Church. In reality, it was a sincere call for the Church to begin addressing some of the problems that Luther felt had obscured the Gospel message.

Martin Luther hoped that his ***Theses*** would be seen and discussed as a step toward renewal and change of the Church, so that people would know the truth about God's forgiveness for their lives.

The powerful message of Romans 3: 19-28 had changed his thinking and changed his heart and he was now overflowing with joy after many years of guilt and a need for forgiveness. He wanted to share this message, he discovered, with all.

Romans 3: 22-24 says, "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ."

Little did he know the enormous impact on the world that his one simple act would have. His willingness to stand up to the pope and emperor in the name of the Gospel of Jesus Christ changed the face of history, and the face and direction of the entire Christian Church.

One of the most bitterly resented abuses of the Church at that time was the so-called ***indulgences*** to make money. When a Christian purchased an indulgence from the Church, for himself or another, there was a reduction in the amount of time a person's soul had to remain in

Purgatory, atoning for his sins, before ascending to heaven. You would pay money and receive a document in return. The more money you paid the less time in Purgatory. This is what started his thinking and from this was born the *Ninety-five Theses*. Most of them were challenges to the sale of indulgences and out of them came what would be the two guiding principles of Luther's theology: *Sola fide* means "*by faith alone*"— faith, as opposed to good works, as the basis for salvation and *sola scriptura*— "*by scripture alone*," – was the belief that only the Bible could tell us the truth.

Today, we celebrate our past and how God used people in our history to bring about change so today many people can read the Bible in their own language and study the Word of God. We celebrate the movement of the Holy Spirit that brings us newness and change and renewal, both in our personal lives and in the life of the Church. Martin Luther planted seeds for religious freedom in the world.

Luther would eventually be declared a heretic and excommunicated from the church, and yet, he refused to back down from his beliefs, saying, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God," Luther declared. "I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

Martin Luther picked up where men like, John Wycliffe began questioning practices of the Church in the 1300's. Wycliffe's work at the University of Oxford led to the first complete translation of the Bible in English in 1382. He suffered religious persecution because of it. Wycliffe influenced John Hus, a professor at Prague, who led a reform movement in Prague until he was burned at the stake. John Wycliffe would not see the impact his work would have on the Protestant Reformation, years later, but Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and Ulrich Zwingli would carry the torch of change into the future.

Martin Luther's change of heart came because of his study of the Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Romans. He read **Romans 1:16-17**, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness

that is *by faith* from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live *by faith*.”

He began seeing a great truth of scripture that had been lost to many in the church then and also today. Keeping the law cannot save us; giving money to the church cannot save us; taking the sacraments cannot save us; living a “good life” cannot save us. We can never be declared righteous in God’s sight by our own efforts. We are saved by grace through faith.

What is faith? Faith is being totally convinced of something, being fully persuaded that it is real and true, enough to trust in it and rely on it, having total confidence that it will do what it says it will do.

Blondin lived from 1824 to 1897 and was a famous French tightrope walker and acrobat. His greatest fame came in 1859 when he accomplished one of his greatest feats for the first time—walking across a 1100 foot tight-rope suspended 160 feet above the waters of Niagara Falls. Blondin went on to walk across the falls several times, each time with a different theatrical flare: blindfolded, in a sack, on stilts, and sitting down halfway while he made and ate an omelet. On one such a high-wire walk, Blondin crossed over the falls pushing a wheelbarrow. When he reached the other side, he asked the spectators if they believed he could do it again. Everyone cheered. Blondin then asked if they believed he could cross the tightrope with someone in the wheelbarrow. Everyone cheered believing that he could do it and wanting to see this incredible stunt. Blondin then asked for a volunteer to ride in the wheelbarrow. No one stepped forward. It was one thing to believe Blondin could do what they had all seen him do, and another to put your life in his hands letting him push you across the falls on the high wire. They lacked the faith in him.

Hebrews 11 says, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (v6) And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

This chapter of Hebrews, lists those who lived by faith in God, trusted, believed, and relied on God to help them with what they were facing and to move forward by faith. By faith, the people of the past teach us: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Joshua, Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel, the prophets. It says, “All these people were still living **by faith** when they died.”

Like these faithful, we also, today, need to be people of faith. So that when people see us or hear our story they can say, “By faith they followed the Lord and trusted in God.”

The Reformation was a time of great change for the Universal Church and, today, we are living during a time of great change once again in the church.

The church used to be the center of the family and raising children in the ways of the Lord. Knowing the 10 Commandments, the 23rd Psalm, John 3:16, The Beatitudes, knowing about Jesus from His birth to his death and Resurrection. Today, more children are on the sports fields on Sunday morning than in a Sunday School class or youth group. Many in our country do not see the need to go to church. They don't live **by faith** in God.

The empty pews in many churches aren't just due to the pandemic, it is due to not believing in God, not wanting to acknowledge that God is their Creator and not making God a priority in their life.

Sometimes a tragedy will bring people to God and sometimes it won't. We all are sinners, and we need the love and the forgiveness of Jesus. Jesus is the bridge to eternal life. Jesus is the one that changes us from the inside out. Jesus is the one that teaches us it isn't a point system that gets you to heaven—it is the condition of your heart.

By faith in the power of God and the filling of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can accomplish great things for God. All we need to do is have faith and believe that God can move mountains and change hearts. The impossible is possible with God, **by faith**.

We aren't perfect people, we all have sinned, and this is the message that Jesus tried to teach his followers 2000 years ago, and it is the message that the reformers used to launch a reformation in the church

over 500 years ago. It is the same message that we need to remember today.

By faith we need to call others to join us in this Community of Faith. Christ died and rose from the dead to give us a relationship with God. Our hurting and broken world needs to come into God's presence and find wholeness and peace that the world cannot give. When you are lost and searching for the meaning of life—come to church, read the Bible, pray to God and you will find meaning and direction for your life.

Will your future be walking with the Lord or walking away from the Lord?

Pray for those that you know that don't know Jesus as their Savior. Pray for their future. Pray for the future of the church that many will come and worship with us and their hearts will be changed.

Pray for a revival so the future generations will know that ***by faith*** we believed, trusted and lived a life following God.

If what we believe makes any difference, then it has to change the way we live now and in the future.