The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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A Bold Sinner

This Sunday, we celebrate the 500th anniversary of what is considered by many historians the most important event in European history. At the time, it might have seemed rather mundane. On the 31st of October, 1517, Martin Luther, a scholarly monk and professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, in Germany, tacked up a document on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Church doors were used much like bulletin boards are today, but this document was an invitation to students to debate 95 theses condemning the practice of selling indulgences, a means of raising money by promising eternal rewards that today is universally acknowledged as corrupt, and even at the time was condemned by many.

Luther's study of the New Testament, and particularly the passage from Romans which you heard read a few minutes ago had led him to the conviction that our eternal destiny is a free gift of God's grace. Salvation and "righteousness" is not something we can achieve or earn for ourselves, but which we can only receive through faith. In addition, the Catholic church taught that Jesus himself had given the keys of the kingdom to the pope, and so the church had the power to determine one's eternal destiny. But if salvation is God's free gift, received through faith, the role of the church, especially the pope is much less significant than the church taught. The indulgences, and all efforts to achieve salvation through our own effort and goodness, were leading people astray. What made the event significant is that the printing press had been invented shortly before, and the 95 theses were swiftly printed and disseminated.

That challenge tapped into a deep dissatisfaction with the practices of the Roman hierarchy in Germany. The Roman Catholic Church initially ignored Luther, but soon realized that the relatively minor issue of indulgences was being seen as a gauntlet thrown before the authority of the Pope. Luther quickly acquired considerable celebrity, and the church's efforts to quell the unrest gave him even more celebrity. And the more the church hierarchy dug in its heels, the broader Luther's criticisms became. He became the focus of a much broader conflict between medieval scholastic theology conducted entirely in Latin and the new scholarship being fueled by studying

the Bible in the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, which had not been done in the West for 500 years. Luther did not initially consider himself a revolutionary, but a loyal servant offering his scholarship to the Pope. But even his attempts at conciliation often contained the seeds of more controversy. Eventually, he was accused of heresy, and threatened with excommunication, which could easily have led to imprisonment, even execution. But Luther was an opinionated and principled man, and the threats led to his famous statement: "Here I stand; I can do no other." Fortunately for Luther, the ruler of the German province where he lived protected him, although he had to hide in virtual house arrest for more than a year.

During that period of enforced captivity, Luther translated the New Testament, and later the entire Bible into German, and his translation is said to have had as much influence on the German language as Shakespeare has had on English.

Luther proved a prolific writer, an articulate debater, and an independent thinker. The invention of the printing press was as big a revolution in communication as the development of the internet has been in ours, and Luther's writings were widely published and widely read. The Reformers started to call themselves Protestants, and eventually, enough princes and bishops and other influential figures lined up behind him that the church in Germany, after failing to move the Roman Church to reform, broke away completely. Luther was radical in some ways: he encouraged monks and nuns to marry, himself married a nun and with her had a very happy marriage and a family of six children. In other ways he was fairly traditional: he supported retaining bishops in the German church, retained much of the traditional liturgy, church art and architecture, and opposed more radical movements that would have ended the state church altogether.

The Reformation in Germany led to similar movements in other European countries. In the city states that now comprise Switzerland, second generation reformers like John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli developed their own branches of Protestant theology. In France and Spain, Protestants were viciously persecuted, tortured and sometimes executed. In England and Scotland, Protestants and Catholics struggled for generations over who would control the crown. It took more than a hundred years before the principle of toleration and respect for individual conscience was accepted throughout Europe.

That, in short, is why the initially mundane act of tacking a theological document to that Wittenberg Door is considered such an important historical event.

For those of you who find history boring, I apologize for taking some time this morning to explore this. But I am not really sorry. It is one of the conceits of our age that history is not important, and we don't need to reflect on it. More than thirty years ago, United Church theologian Gordon Harland once wrote: "...only those who are in touch with a vital heritage are in possession of the resources to shape a new age and the only way to be true to that heritage is to be responsive to the claims of the new."[1] Another United Church historian, John Webster Grant wrote that, "The most effective innovators in the life of the Church have been precisely those who, in seeking to deal with vital issues of their own time, have found light in authentic elements of tradition that had somehow been neglected or forgotten."[2] And another church historian (Jaroslav Pelikan) compared those who want to be genuinely innovative to athletes trying to jump far. The best way to jump far, as you all know is not to start from a standing position, but to start further back and take a run at it. Those who don't know their history, are doing a standing broad jump.[3]

The neglect of our heritage remains a particular problem among many in the United Church. That is partly because we are a Union church. You could expect Lutherans to know a fair bit about Luther, Presbyterians to know something about John Calvin and John Knox, Methodists to have heard something about the Wesleys, but as a Union Church, they are all our ancestors, so it is harder – harder, but perhaps even more important. Also, as a Union Church, we are sometimes so tolerant of diverse points of view that we neglect to encourage people to engage different points of view and to evaluate them carefully. To take our heritage seriously does not mean that we have to be uncritical in relation to it. In fact, the opposite is true. When we fail to take it seriously, it has an unconscious hold on us. When we reflect on our heritage consciously, we find ourselves free to engage it in a mature way.

Luther's legacy is both positive and negative. On the negative side, he viewed anything that didn't come from God to be from the devil, so he could be quite vicious in his language toward people whom he considered opponents. The Pope was the "your Hellishness," Anabaptists were "the spawn of Satan," and other Reformers who disagreed with him were blockheads and worse. In that, Luther was not alone. The age was not known for moderation in the language of debate. People were passionate

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[1] *Touchstone: Heritage and Theology for a New Age,* Jan. 1983, p. 4
[2] *Touchstone:* Jan. 1994, p. 12.
[3] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*.

about the issues they were facing and they were not good at separating issues and personalities. More seriously, although Luther early counselled moderation and tolerance toward Jews, over time he became more and more frustrated by their refusal to convert to Christianity, and some of his later language is so violent that there is a lively debate about whether the Nazis could have undertaken the holocaust in a non-Lutheran culture.

On the positive side, Luther was ahead of his time in his view of women. He always spoke appreciately of women, and avoided the misogynism of many church leaders of the time.

Perhaps most important, Luther was a profoundly important biblical scholar and theologian whose contributions to the way we understand our faith have been remarkable. His challenge to medieval Catholic theology were important and led to significant reforms within the Roman church. His emphasis on grace and on the recovery of Biblical scholarship was pioneering. Although at the time, his work was seriously contested, in recent years, dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics has resolved most of the issues that were controversial 500 years ago.

Luther was not perfect, but he never claimed to be. In fact, he was very much aware of many of his own failings, which is why his rediscovery of salvation by grace through faith was so important to him. He considered his role in history as largely accidental, and referred to his writings as "puny efforts." While he was provocative, opinionated and belligerent at times, he was also very much aware that none of us escape the taint of sin. Sin touches everything we do, even our most noble efforts, and we can't escape it. While we should not intentionally sin, we have to act, so we should act with bold trust in God's grace, we should "sin boldly," in one of his most famous expressions, trusting in God's grace to redeem our flawed efforts. And that, I think remains the best way to understand Martin Luther, as a bold sinner and a flawed saint.