

It's Reformation Sunday. Every year on the last Sunday of October we focus on the Reformation, why it happened, and why it is important. If the Reformation is a historical curiosity - it is not an appropriate subject for a worship service. If the causes and nature of the Reformation are well known - it is not necessary to go over it.

The Reformation is more than a historical curiosity. The nature of the Reformation is not well known. Every time I begin to think that the church is tired of hearing about the Reformation and the questions of faith that still are foremost in our minds - something happens...and I know it's time to tell the story again.

Last week I asked some younger members of our church who Martin Luther was. Everyone recognized the name of a great leader. About half recalled his "I have a dream" speech and commented that it was a shame he had been shot back in the sixties.

The issues of the Reformation in the early 1500s are *not* always well known. Now let's turn our attention to whether or not they are important to us today.

You've probably been listening to the news. These are insecure times and people are worried. The perennial source of concern is the economy, of course. At a news conference an official was chiding the media about what kind of information was being given to people. Many of us are worried about greed tearing our society apart. And, over everything, is the fear of war.

The economy, the media, greed, and war. Our society is in crisis.

In the late 15th & early 16th century society had problems, too. They had invented smelting and pumps. That meant that the production of silver mines increased 500 per cent in less than twenty years. Silver was used to make coins. This is not a seminar on economics - but I will say that if you increase the money supply by 500 per cent it will cause inflation. Today's generation is not the first to have *economic* problems.

Around 1450 John Guttenburg invented a printing press with moveable type. In the forty years between 1460 and 1500 more books were printed than the scribes had produced throughout all the centuries of the Middle Ages. Even the smallest communities were flooded with strange ideas, new philosophies, and different accounts of history than had never been heard of before. Our generation is not the first to see the disruptive influence of the *media*.

Better farming methods meant fewer people were needed to work the land. Massive unemployment sent people to cities that were not prepared for them. There was widespread homelessness. Merchants in the cities took advantage of the poor. About this time the church wrote a line into canon law: "A merchant is rarely or never able to please God." Previous generations have seen the effects of *greed*.

For the first time chemists invented a stable gunpowder mixture which presents us with the oxymoronic notion of being able to shoot each other safely. This encouraged the production of guns and cannons. *War* took on dimensions that it had not had before.

What did the people of that time need? The same thing we need today. Security. We are faced with the same problems and we turn to the church with the same questions. How can we have hope and stability and a direction in our lives?

The church had an answer to the need for security. The church said, "Work harder. You have to work hard to make yourself acceptable to God."

Within a very few years, at this point in history, God's people threw themselves into a frenzy of trying to get religious. Acts of devotion were every where. People went on religious pilgrimages (to go to holy places or visit holy relics). People reported miracles all the time. People had visions. The number of religious festivals increased. In Germany, children were

named for saints so frequently that the old German names all but disappeared within a generation.

The people were uncertain of how to make God love them, and the church played on their insecurity. One of the most frequently quoted verses of scripture in that day was Ecclesiastes 9:1: "No one knows whether he is worthy of God's love or hate." If you are not certain of your salvation, you'd better work harder to make certain.

The way to work harder was to honor the church, give money, and ask the representatives of the church (usually the local priest) what you should do. There were various services you could do for the church that would take time off your stay in purgatory.

Purgatory is a concept you may not be familiar with. We do not teach it in this church. The idea is: When someone dies if he is going to go to hell, he does. In some very rare cases he might go directly to heaven. Usually he goes to purgatory to pay for all of his sins which are not really bad enough to send him to hell but certainly disqualify him from going to heaven. How long he stays in purgatory depends on the number and nature of his sins and how long it has been since he did some of those good things those poor folks were always trying to do to earn God's favor - the pilgrimages and the visits to the relics and so forth. (Cardinal Albrecht had a collection of holy relics which he claimed, if you visited them, were worth 39,245,120 years off of purgatory.) Mostly the people could overcome their uncertainty of salvation by giving money.

The church needed money. (You think we're concerned about how much our building project will cost? Pope Leo X was building St. Peter's Basilica and getting Raphael and Michaelangelo to paint it. Think of what *that* costs.)

The world was in crisis. The economy, the media, the greed, the weapons. The people looked to the church for security. The church took advantage of the crisis and told the people to work harder.

The definition of the word "crisis" is not "a bad situation". The definition has to do with "a turning point". In medicine, a crisis is a time when the patient will either die - or he will recover. In history, a crisis is a decisive moment. Society will go one way or another.

Into this crisis walked a young monk. I'll tell you how he got there.

Hans Luther was making a good living as a mining engineer in Mansfeld, Germany. He sent his son, Martin, to the University of Erfurt to earn a law degree. Hans had some ambitions that Martin would return home, be a lawyer, and, perhaps, one day be mayor of Mansfeld. (Then Martin's place in history would be secure.) Martin was returning to Erfurt after a visit home and a storm blew up. Lightning hit nearby and knocked him down. He shouted, "Save me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk." (St. Anne was the patron saint of miners.) Martin lived and St. Anne had another recruit.

In July of 1505 Martin Luther entered the Black Cloister (the monks wore black) in Erfurt of the Observant Augustinians. This was the strictest order in Erfurt. It was no less the business of monks to earn spiritual currency than it was the business of the early capitalists to earn material currency. Luther threw himself into it. There were six worship services a day which began at 2:00 a.m. There was prayer, meditation, spiritual exercises, fasting, sleeping on a stone floor with no blanket.

He was smart and he worked hard. He became a priest. He was directed to study for a doctorate which he did and assumed additional responsibilities as a professor of Bible at Wittenburg University. The more he worked with the people of his parish and the more he studied the Bible he began to formulate ideas - principles that were not accepted at that time, but those ideas have come to express our faith.

The three major principles of the Reformation are familiar to everyone. We accept them so easily that we are in danger of not thinking about them, and letting them slip away.

The first is what Luther called "The Priesthood of All Believers". Understand the belief at that time was that a person's sins were not forgiven until a priest pronounced forgiveness.

Luther came to believe that a person is responsible for his own forgiveness. A person comes to God through Jesus Christ, and no one can step in with authority over a person's relationship with God. If you are a believer, you are a priest. Later, Luther was to write, "As soon as a child is baptized he has all the authority of all the popes and bishops who ever lived."

The second principle is the Sole Authority of the Bible. When believers look for direction and try to settle disputes, tradition is helpful, good sense is helpful, the rule of the church is stabilizing...but the authority for life is the Holy Scripture. And if the Bible goes against tradition or against good sense or against the church...the sole authority is the Bible.

Most important of all is the principle Luther called "Grace Alone". You are saved by grace, not good works. Security lies in knowing God has promised his love to us. It is not always safe to quote Luther this close to lunch time - but I'll risk it. "You would have to spend a long time polishing your shoes, preening and primping to attain an inheritance, if you had no letter and seal with which you could prove your right to it. But if you have a letter and seal, and believe, desire, and seek it, it must be given to you, even though you were scaly, scabby, stinking and most filthy." Our inheritance of the grace of God is not a matter of looking good. No matter how we look, or what we do, Grace is God's gift to us and nothing can take it from us.

People needed security and the church said "work harder". Luther said, "No, our salvation does not depend on our work. It is God's work. You are secure."

Albert of Brandenburg wanted to be bishop. Pope Leo X said he could for 10,000 ducats of gold. Albert made the deal and started raising the money by selling indulgences. Indulgences were pieces paper that said your sins were forgiven. Buy an indulgence and you were certain to go to heaven. In fact, you could buy an indulgence in advance. You could get them to not only cover past sins. You could buy them to take care of any sins you might be planning for the future. The biggest indulgence market was for relatives who had already died. Albert's salesman, a priest named John Tetzel, preached that people could spend some money and get their parents out of purgatory. For just a little money, people could put their dead loved ones in heaven.

Tetzel would come into town with a parade. The proclamation about the effect of indulgences would be on display on scarlet and gold - beside a stack of letters of indulgence. And he would start preaching about the pain of the people in purgatory. His assistants would make sound effects of people moaning. They had a little jingle: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

Luther started asking his parishioners why they weren't coming to church or taking the sacrament. They said they didn't need to. They'd bought indulgences.

Luther was irate. He had come to believe in the Priesthood of All Believers. Here was this man who said he could forgive sins, instead of an individual being responsible for his own forgiveness. Luther had come to believe in the Sole Authority of the Bible, and this man claimed authority to forgive sins because the church had given it to him, he didn't need to prove it from the Bible. Luther had come to believe that we are saved by God's grace alone, and this man offered salvation by paying enough money.

On the eve of All Saints' Day, it was October 31, 1517, thirty-three year old Martin Luther marched to the cathedral and there on the wooden door that served as a community bulletin board, he nailed 95 theses. 95 statements that he asked anyone who cared to debate with him. Luther naively sent a copy to Albert of Brandenburg, thinking that Albert would be shocked to learn what was going on.

Germany was ready for a change. They were in crisis - a turning point in history.

Luther had strong support in his native Germany. The rest of the world was outraged at what Luther had done. The church told Luther to retract his statements. Luther announced that he would denounce the church and the pope himself if the church contradicted the Bible.

In 1521, in the city of Worms, a meeting was called. (A name that was used for an official convocation was a "diet". So, this was called the "Diet of Worms". They call the cafeteria up at Luther seminary that to this day.) Luther was ordered by his church to take back what he had said and all that he had written or be ex-communicated. He answered:

My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I will not take back anything, for to go against conscience is neither honest nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me.

Martin Luther had no desire to split the church, but it did split. He always hoped that the church would change, re-form. People thus called this period the Reformation. Those who followed him, who protested in the name of their faith, were soon called Protestants.

During the early years following Luther's excommunication, changes did take place. Worship changed from Latin to German - the people could worship in language they understood. A great emphasis on congregational singing developed using German folk tunes. The sacraments were reduced from seven to two. The people were allowed to have both bread and wine at communion rather than just bread. Luther put the Bible into the hands of the people. It had only been available in Latin, but he translated it into German so everyone could read it. Luther's translation of the Bible is still the most widely used in Germany today.

When historians discuss the most influential people of history it is always surprising to learn of Luther's significance. In the recent look back that accompanied the Year 2000 celebrations some of the historians interviewed suggested that Martin Luther should be ranked number one. When the voting was done, he was rated number three in a couple of polls I read – behind Guttenberg and Issac Newton. But more influential than any politician or king or military commander.

In a similar exercise, Time magazine listed six quotes that changed the world in the last thousand years: The first one is: "Here I stand, I can do no other."

Of all his accomplishments, I think that if Luther were asked to name only one thing he could give to future generations, he would say, "I preached about God's grace. When there is a crisis, follow God." As he wrote: "The Gospel commands us to look, not at our own good deeds or perfection but at God Himself as He promises, and at Christ Himself, the Mediator... And this is the reason why our theology is certain: It depends on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive."