

Our Creation Story: Born from a Protest
Psalm 118, Romans 1: 16-17
November 19, 2017

October 31 was the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation and to mark this milestone, Pastor Abby and I have been preaching on Martin Luther and the Reformation. This is the third and final installment in our Luther series.

A fun story from the Crop Hunger Walk this year: St. Dominic's Catholic Church was this year's host on October 29th. As the walk was beginning, one of the Lutherans in the crowd spoke up to say, "St. John's Lutheran church is hosting a Beer and Hymn sing at Imminent Brewing at 5:00p.m. tonight to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. You are all invited. Father Denny Dempsey, the priest at St. Dominic's Catholic church, was standing right there. This is a little bit awkward. Father Denny pipes up to say, "And I'll be there selling indulgences, at a low, low price."

It is important for churches to pay attention to their creation stories. The purpose that brings a church into being determines its direction, and churches will renew and revitalize themselves as they rediscover how their original purpose applies to a new time and place.

This church was formed as Northfield was formed. Churches were important for many reasons, but people thought that the best of Christian values was important for the health of a community. This church started what became Carleton college for a variety of reasons, but at the heart of the efforts of churches to start colleges was to send the best of Christian values into the world through education. I think this congregation has always been facing outward, sending Christian values out into the world, not to convert, but to heal.

A whole wing of the church, including UCC churches comes out of the Reformation. Remembering the Reformation will remind us of some things that are in our church DNA. Last week I talked about grace, how finding and being open to God's grace changed Luther's life, this grace healed Luther's heart. The church now is still preaching grace, inviting us to trust in God's grace and love and this will heal the human heart. We should hear that "we are accepted as we are," at the church and begin to discover how this can heal our lives.

But there's more to the Reformation and more to Luther. It isn't only this insight about grace that creates the Reformation, the insight about grace then leads Luther to protest the injustice of the time, and Luther protests the injustice of the church. This means Luther is protesting the most powerful forces of his time.

In our time, the most powerful forces are big business, and government, and the way those two work together. But in Luther's time, the church was the government, and the church was big business. Luther walks into the center of it all. Luther relives the story of Moses going to Pharaoh, to the center of empire to free the Hebrew slaves. Luther relives the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple. This is our story, this is who we are, and it is important to keep it in front of us.

First Luther convinces his colleagues at the University of his position on grace and how it challenges the penitential system of the church, and then, the story goes, he posts 97 theses to be debated in an academic setting. The trouble was, no one really cared. This didn't get much attention.

So Luther writes another set of theses, this time 95 theses, and this this time Luther attacks the theological underpinning of the sale of indulgences. Luther puts his finger right on the money, so to speak. Here's a line from historian Justo L. Gonzalez, "with little awareness of what he was doing or whom he was attacking, Luther had spoken against plans for profit designed by very powerful lords and prelates."

In Luther's time, people were purchasing indulgences for loved ones as a way to reduce the time they had to spend in Purgatory. Purgatory was seen as a sort of eternal waiting room for people who had died, who were bound for heaven but needed some additional purification first. Purchasing an indulgence could speed the process along. Who wouldn't want this for their loved one?

The sale of indulgences was ripe for corruption. The particular sale of indulgences Luther was protesting was authorized by Pope Leo X, but it involved the economic and political ambitions of powerful people in Luther's Germany. Specifically, Albert of Brandenburg made a deal with Pope Leo that he would get the most powerful archbishop seat in Germany in exchange for raising money for Pope Leo's dream of finishing the Basilica of St. Peter. The

Pope authorized the sale of indulgences for this purpose under the condition that half of the proceeds come back to the Pope for the sake of building the cathedral.

The person put in charge of the sale of indulgences in Luther's Germany was brother John Tetzel who was kind of a medieval version of a televangelist like Jimmy Swaggart shameless, willing to say anything for the sake of making the sale. Tetzel and his preachers promised for instance that, "as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

Luther suggested that the Pope should free people from purgatory himself out of love, since the church believed he had the power to do so. And he should give his money to the poor, rather than taking their money through indulgences, and he should give his money to the poor even if it required selling the Basilica of St. Peter.

These are fighting words. Those fighting words, Luther's rhetorical gifts, and developments like the printing press, started a populist uprising. Luther's life was soon at risk, and he was placed on trial. At that trial he was asked to recant, to take back his words in all his writings, words that articulated his theological position that challenged the penitential system of the church and the sale of indulgences, and other things, or be excommunicated. Luther had to decide if he really trusted his insight about grace (because it was believed that you couldn't go to heaven outside of the mechanisms of the church). The legend is that Luther says at the end of a speech, "I will not recant. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me."

Luther shows amazing courage.

We read Psalm 118 today because it was Luther's favorite Psalm. It is a Psalm about placing trust in God. This Psalm says, "with God on my side, whom shall I fear. What can mortals do to me? It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes."

The trust Luther places in God sends him into the world in a bold and fearless way, challenging the injustice that he sees. Luther is concerned about the poor, and he challenges powers and structures through which the poor are suffering. Luther goes to the heart of things.

The pattern of Luther's faith is the pattern of ours. We are invited to trust in God's grace, and this grace does heal the heart. But that grace doesn't stop there. Our faith isn't only individual. This grace of God then sends us together into the world, to love it and serve it, and to do so boldly.

Remembering Luther and claiming him as an ancestor of faith will push us to be bold. No one accused him of being bashful.

Scholar Phyllis Tickle said that every 500 years the church cleans house, it goes through a great transition and it is like it holds a great rummage sale. The Reformation was a time of transition and she suggests we are in a time of transition too. The church is trying to rediscover itself. I wonder if the church will rediscover itself and rediscover vitality as it acts in bold ways to get to the heart of our problems.

Our church is a member of Isaiah MN, a coalition of churches working for racial and economic equity and climate justice. Isaiah's working on something more ambitious than anything it has ever done. The beginning is a conversation campaign that First UCC leaders and I have been participating in. The goal is for ISIAH to have conversations with 6000 people this fall, we are partnering with 18 other organizations like MN350 and the Land Stewardship Project, that are responsible for conversations with 6000 more people. At these conversations we are asking people what is affecting them and the people they know and love, and then the goal is to take a people's agenda that we move into the center of the conversation about the needs of our state. We start that by sending from these conversations all over the state to their local caucus meetings on February 6th with this people's agenda. If you would like to know more about this, I'd be happy to talk with you.

I've had a conversation at my house with some First UCC people, and this week I had a conversation at my house with some clergy, (I made them some soup) inviting them into this work and inviting them to have these conversations too. I asked these clergy, "what is hurting you and the people you know and love right now?" One clergyperson responded, "my parents live in rural MN and they are worried about the cost of health insurance. Actually, they don't have dental insurance and they had to take out a loan to pay their dental bills. "What do you mean?" I asked. They took out a second mortgage on their house to pay their dental bills."

This is absurd. Something needs to change, and not only with health care, but with sexual harassment and sexual violence, gun violence, with race, the growing gap between rich and poor, climate change, and the list goes on. For change to happen, people will need to band together, move into the places where change happens in our society, and demand it, speak

boldly. Churches across the state, including ours are doing this work right now, trying to figure this out. We don't know what God will do with this love we are giving, but we are trying to get to the heart of things. And it feels very Luther-an to me. It feels very Luther-an to me.

We are saved by grace that transforms the heart and then we are sent to love and serve the world. If we follow in Luther's footsteps, we will love boldly, and not be ashamed. May God give us grace and courage. Amen.