

SERMON: 2017/10/29: "Reformation Sunday" - BTR

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front. Play video: 'The Story of Martin Luther (Playmobil Animation)' - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tox2TfIUH90&t=16s>]

And that's the true story of Martin Luther in a "nutshell!"

Let's pray:

Father God, thank you for the gift of Jesus and the offer of a "right relationship with You" through His sacrifice on the cross. Help us to see the truth clearly, and run after it with enthusiasm like Martin Luther, and save us from being confused by contrary messages. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Ask children to depart]

'Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!"  
He said, "Nobody loves me."  
I said, "God loves you. Do[n't] you believe in God?"  
He said, "Yes."  
I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?"  
He said, "A Christian."  
I said, "*Me, too!* Protestant or Catholic?"  
He said, "Protestant."  
I said, "*Me, too!* What franchise?"  
He said, "Baptist."  
I said, "*Me, too!* Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"  
He said, "Northern Baptist."  
I said, "*Me, too!* Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"  
He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist."  
I said, "*Me, too!* Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist *Eastern* Region?"  
He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region."  
I said, "*Me, too!*" Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?"  
He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912."  
I said, "*Die, heretic!*" And I pushed him over.' [n.1] [Pause]

Before Luther's reforming ardour caused the rift with his superiors in Rome, there was, in the West, a single, *unified* catholic Church. Yes, apart from some *very* small obscure minority groups in a couple of remote, far-flung corners; Jesus' *dream* - His ambition - of 'one body' of believers [see: 1 Cor. 12:12-31], *international* in scope [Mt. 28:19] yet tightly-knit, orderly and harmonious [see: Prov. 17:1; Col. 2:5; 1 Cor. 14:33], was tantalising close to the

medieval reality.

But the "Reformation" upset all that.

And tore the lid off a Pandora's Box that created the farcical, mission-harming situation that we know here in McMinnville.

So, why dwell on the very thing behind our disunity?

Good question! Thanks for asking. [Wink.] [Pause.]

In the early-1600s, Europe was at war.

Two *powerful* coalitions - between them representing *all* the countries on the continent - were locked in a gruesome, apocalyptic struggle.

It raged non-stop for *thirty* appalling years, turning parts of the Rhineland - normally verdant, fertile fields of golden grain - into 'desolate' wastes, and hollowing out her population: reducing it from 16 million to only 4. [n.2] (A *quarter(!)* of what it had been.)

The endless "criss-crossing" of their various, *vast* armies over the same terrain - and 'their reckless destruction of material supplies [as they went] and [the repeated interruption]...of sowing and harvesting [that they] caused [led to widespread] famine [and starvation far beyond the battlefield]', and their raping and defecating precipitated terrible plagues. [n.3]

In Germany, the Swedes - a nation normally caricatured as calm and peace-loving, engrossed by flat-pack furniture - destroyed eighteen *thousand* villages, 'wiping one-third of th[at] country's towns from the map.' [n.4]

In northern Italy, the French deliberately 'block[ed] or deviate[d] the canals that irrigated [the]...meadows and rice-paddies, that fed Milan and the other cities', and cavalry units systematically butchered any peasants who attempted to collect food from the fields.[n.5]

So, what could justify such pro-longed cruelty?

Such savagery and callousness?

Well, freedom.

The freedom to think for oneself.

The freedom to choose what to believe *and to pursue, unhindered, after it*, which was the principle at the heart of the "Lutheran" project.

*This* is what lit the blue touch-paper for that terrible conflict.

*And* what was worth fighting for so desperately, even to the extent of inflicting great suffering on those who disagreed in order to dissuade them from imposing an authority - the Papacy, which had, in the eyes of a growing number, "lost its way" - and badly so.

And I'm not just talking about the corruption that was rampant within the (clerical) hierarchy - of lecherous popes with harems [n.6], of (other) popes giving birth on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica [n.7].

That sort of thing - that species of blatant deviation - had been commonplace for centuries, provoking protest from marginal, *prophetic* figures like John Wycliffe in England.

But *now* what was at stake was something of far greater importance - The Truth.

Specifically, *Biblical* truth, which Jesus Himself referenced - in one of His parables - as a pearl of unsurpassed value - a pearl worth selling all that one has for. [Mt. 13:45-46.]

And the issue - for these first "*Protestants*" - was this:

The Church - *at that time* - seemed to regard "getting into Heaven" as a race, which is, to be fair, a metaphor used in *Hebrews* 12 [v.1].

But they'd got quite carried away with this idea.

And had instituted - what one scholar calls [n.8] - an onerous 'sacramental treadmill' of things every person *needed* to do to be saved.

And it was a seductive idea:

If I went on pilgrimage, I got closer to the goal.

Maybe if I ate fish on a Friday I closer.

If I went on Crusade I got closer.

If I went to Mass I got closer.

And, perhaps most grotesquely, as we heard in the video, if I paid for something called an "indulgence" - literally, a certificate - I. Got. Closer.

And this "race" - this process - towards salvation could continue even after death: the Church - *then* - taught that the soul was able to enjoy a lively existence apart from the body, and so, free from its fleshly prison, it could continue *proactively* seeking to ameliorate God's impending judgment (in a mysterious, other-worldly place called, "Purgatory").

But once you put the words of Jesus into the hands of ordinary men and women - *and in their own language* (rather than Latin), they began to discover - *for themselves* - that this system was a bad misrepresentation of what our Saviour had taught, which is that even our very best attempts at doing good are like dirty rags to God [Isaiah 64:6], *unless* they are performed *for* Him, out of a (genuine) sense of gratitude and devotion - a real appreciation - a *reciprocation* - of His magnanimous love for you and me.

In other words, its no good to pay a visit to the priest for some confession if,

deep down, my attitude is to just "tick a box."

No, what's needed is "contrition" - a great word!

A recognition of my - to return to last week's theme - (intrinsic) *unworthiness*.

After all, Moses - who we hear, *this morning*, was the "mightiest" of prophets, unparalleled by us in terms of His commitment and courage for Christ's cause - was denied entry to the first Promised Land.

So, what hope have I that I'll see the *second* Canaan upon Jesus' return? None, *but for His death on my behalf*, which has thrown *wide* the "pearly gates," hallelujah!

This singular insight was afforded Luther because he was able - for a moment - to see matters as they *really* were, *despite* the enormous pressure being exerted by the conventional wisdom of the time; the pressure to conform, to "go with the flow;" to be "on trend."

And this is still the case - maybe more than ever?

The internet, rather than broadening our attitudes, has, *lots* of commentators claim, done the reverse: its created virtual cocoons in which we indoctrinate ourselves with whatever it is we've already decided to think, and from which we venture forth only to "troll" those who disagree.

(And I'm talking about the "Left" and the "Right.")

Rather than actually debate with one-another, and *test* the evidence, we shut the argument down, drowning out what we don't want to hear by crying either "Political Correctness!" or, "Hate-speech!"

We rush to one end of the spectrum or another, looking for the drama and excitement of rallies or counter-protests rather than the truth itself, especially if that truth is something more complicated, more demanding, and especially if it is found in this dusty old book. [\[Grab Bible\]](#)

[\[Still holding the Bible\]](#)

But you know what?

Like the "Reformers," millions and millions of Christians continue to find it right here.

Are we willing to gainsay them all?

Let's pray: Lord, we need clarity. Help us to open our minds - and our hearts - to the truth; and when it conflicts with what the world says, give us the courage to hold fast to Your will and Word, amen.

Footnotes:

1. Philips, Emo (29th of September 2005), 'The Best God Joke Ever - and it's Mine!', *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion> (accessed October 28, 2017).
2. Church, James Robb (Ed.) (1922), *The Military Surgeon*, Volume L, Washington, D. C.: The Association of Military Surgeons of the United States, 460.
3. Ibid. See also: Hanlon, Gregory (December 2012), 'Wartime Mortality in Italy's Thirty Years War: The Duchy of Parma 1635-1637', *Histoire, Économie & Société*, Volume 31, No. 4, pp. 3-22, 3.
4. Daudin, Pascal (23rd of May 2017), 'The Thirty Years' War: The First Modern War?', available at <http://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2017/05/23/thirty-years-war-first-modern-war/> (accessed October 25, 2017).
5. Hanlon (2012), 6.
6. Symonds, John Addington (1883), *Renaissance in Italy: The Age of the Depots*, New York, N. Y.: Henry Holt & Co., 417-418.
7. See: Rustici, Craig M. (2006), *The Afterlife of Pope Joan: Deploying the Popess Legend in Early Modern England*, Ann Arbor, M. I.: The University of Michigan Press, 1-2.
8. Sproul, R. C. (1976), *Soli Deo Gloria: Essays in Reformed Theology*, Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 12.