

Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2017 - 500th Anniversary of Luther nailing his 95 Theses to All Saints' Church's door in Wittenberg, Germany. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

What are we celebrating? That seems like a simple question! The answer is both simple, AND complicated! Most obviously, we're celebrating a singular event – Martin Luther's nailing of 95 propositions about faith to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517 – 500 years ago. We're celebrating it because *something came of it* - for a lot of reasons.

The fact that something happened is because *people were ready for something to happen* – a lot of people. And they had been ready for a long time – I recently mentioned John Wycliffe, the English priest, who said a lot of things that Luther said 150 years earlier, and then there's Jan Hus, whom Wycliffe influenced, who was burned at the stake 100 years before Luther. But the time wasn't right.

And something came of it because Martin Luther was a truly exceptional, remarkable person. On October 31, 1517 he became the *'opener of the flood gates.'* And – because of his gifts – he didn't just keep them open, he destroyed them! He did it with the one thing that Wycliffe and Hus didn't have: the printing press. Luther took advantage of what could be considered the “social media” of the 16th Century. The printing press transformed one person's local message into a trans-European movement.

Put together a remarkable man and a transformative tool and the Reformation became an unstoppable movement, with Luther as the symbol and metaphor for the change so many people hoped for.

So what are we celebrating?!! Firstly, we're celebrating a particular, specific event that shows very clearly the way that at *particular moments in history the human spirit wells up and bursts the bonds created by human institutions*. Institutions, after all, will in the end seek to limit rather than liberate human endeavor, distract rather than focus human inquiry, suppress rather than encourage the broad embrace of authentic human identity. Luther stands at the middle of what was a energizing time of transformation, a 'bursting forth' from a self-imposed cocoon that could no longer hold the enormous growth of the human imagination.

Secondly, we're celebrating a *'bursting forth'* that in addition to being a remarkable time of religious transformation, was *also a period of much broader, enormous change* running from at least the the 14th to the 17th century, a period of change that acted as a religious and a cultural bridge between the Middle Ages and modern history, a period of change that birthed the Enlightenment, and gave us the world we know today, religious *and* secular. *In that sense we're celebrating the Spirit's impetus toward the flowering of the human person.*

Out of the many places where human aspiration and concrete action came together in opposition to the suppressive scourge of an atrophying institution one became the symbolic rallying cry: the demand for the scriptures in the native tongue of Christians. As you heard in the Epistle reading, having something in a language that no one here knows fluently enough to understand is frustrating. For medieval Christians it was more; it was symbolic of the control an institution can

exercise over its members, and maintaining scripture in Latin was at the least about that, about “power over.” Through the Reformation, holy scripture “burst forth,” breaking the control of the few, and opening up all sorts of possibilities for every Christian.

- When Luther proclaimed *in their own language* the biblical vision of the priesthood of all believers, he offered all believers a vision of how their church and their faith could be transformed away from the hierarchical model and back to a lived vision of the body of Christ. We are all different people, different Christians, a different community, because of it!
- When Luther proclaimed – *in their own language* – St. Paul’s biblical vision of a new community predicated on baptism he offered all believers a way to understand themselves as ministers. That vision continues to transform not only the Church, it’s also one of the roots of democratic process, which leads, among other places, to government of the people, by the people, for the people. We are all different people, different Christians, a different community, because of it!

Thirdly, while we’re celebrating one moment and one man - Luther on October 31, 1517 - we’re doing so because *it’s a symbolic moment and he’s a symbolic person* that are representatives of a whole pattern of events, and of an enormously diverse and talented group of people, a kaleidoscopic time where patterns emerge and reemerge as human thought and reflection and identity leap forward. Today we miss that because we have a habit of trying to reduce things down to a manageable size and a recognizable, linear pattern so as to understand them. We make it about Luther and his theses on October 31, 1517! But the world doesn’t work that way! It’s like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole: it only works if you use a hammer, and you’re going to damage either the peg or the hole or – more likely – both! Others, in other nations, filled similar roles, and did so both before and after Luther, which is why Reformation scholars are fond of talking about “patterns of reformation,” or “reformations,” rather than “The Reformation, as if it were a monolithic, time-constrained moment with limited goals.

Fourthly, the Reformation period is not about a few prominent actors and a huge audience, but about many people, in different settings, at different times, with different objectives - and we’re celebrating them all today, not just the named few but the unnamed many, who allowed God’s spirit to transform them and so gave us a new, renewed, reformed vision of Christian faith..

Lastly, here’s what we’re not celebrating. We’re not celebrating a vision of a time when there were winners and losers. This is not about seeing Protestants as winners and Roman Catholics as losers; it’s not about victors and vanquished. Either everyone is a winner or no one is! The Reformation period was about members of a Church seeking to reform that Church. Some left, others stayed. The Reformation happened in the Roman Catholic Church too; it simply expressed itself differently. The mistake so often made is to call it the “Counter-Reformation.” It wasn’t “counter” to the reform-minded spirit that birthed Protestantism. Sadly, outside the Roman Catholic Church we forget (or never learned) many of the great Roman Catholic figures of that age, like Ignatius Loyola, or Charles Borromeo, though Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross did make it into our memories!

We do our faith a disservice if we use the language of “churches” as if (to use a Pauline

metaphor) “Christ is divided. As Cardinal Walter Kasper observed a few years back, in the end there are no “churches.” No one ecclesiastical expression gets to claim supremacy over any other. In the end there’s only one Church, and we’re all a part of it - we just have a few problems to work out between ourselves! Rather than “winners” and “losers” we celebrate Today, then, we celebrate something – symbolized by Luther and his theses – that is good for the Body of Christ, though perhaps not so good for any institution that gets to atrophied to be able to change: the ultimate unity of all Christians as seen in our common commitment to the God of our forebears who we encounter in the scriptures in our own language.

All of this is as much about the present as it is about hundreds of years ago! We are again living in a time of great transformation, another “flowering.” So theologians have been saying that after centuries of spending time living in our heads, we humans are now entering the age of the Spirit (with a capital “S”), a time when we can finally place our relationship with God at the center of our lives, and not let our wonderful human intellect get between us and God. So perhaps the greatest gift of the Reformation era is a re-learning of the central message of John’s gospel – that in Jesus we have direct, unfettered access to God - and a re-learning of a central message of the Apostle Paul - that it is through the body of Christ the we enter most fully into the identity prepared for us since the beginning of the world.

Re-learning, and re-embracing these insights is how we will together be able to step boldly and joyfully into what seems like an uncertain future for our world.