

LFLC – October 31, 2012

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 3: 19-28; John 8: 31-36

When Heidi, Hergy and I were deciding which Sundays we would lead services, Hergy remarked that on Reformation Sundays, he had preached on Luther for 46 years or more, so maybe it was time for a different point of view. So here I am – and Hergy will be at St. Bart's and, at least at last check, is not at the door with a hammer and sheet of paper – maybe next time I preach!

I have been mulling over this sermon for some time – 20 minutes with one of the most tumultuous periods in the history of the Church before us.

Let me begin by saying the 16<sup>th</sup> century was, in many ways, an age of anxiety.

**The Black Death** was 14<sup>th</sup> century, but the population of Europe had been reduced by 50% and there was the memory that life on earth was fragile. Whether the work of the devil or the judgment of God, many people did not expect to reach their 3 score years and 10.

**The Feudal system** was breaking down at a time when the privilege of the traditional ruling classes was being questioned. The corruption of the royal courts, the immorality of the aristocrats, brought scorn and rebellion among the hungry peasants.

**The Church** was corrupt. Rome had moved fully into the political realm and aligned itself with various political interests. The Pope had a standing army and needed funds. One way to raise funds (St. Peter's was being built at this time) was to sell indulgences. As we like to clear the debt on our Visa cards, the rich could clear their sin account with one swipe.

The position of Cardinal or Bishop was often for sale.

The local priests often were appointed for similar favours and were often illiterate.

And the Church had no message. The Mass was in Latin as were the Scriptures in a period when fewer people understand the ancient language.

Then there was **technology**.

**Gutenberg's press** – the Bible could be read in the vernacular – wonderful! But movable type could also print all manner of views and opinions – scandalous - what is one to believe?

**And the Queen and King of Spain had ships and an Italian ready to sail to India** – but he was heading the wrong direction. What did new continents mean?

It was on this day in 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Door of the Wittenberg Cathedral challenging the Church to debate. Luther, his father thought, was destined for Law, but Luther eventually found his vocation in the Church, first as an Augustinian Monk and later as a Teacher and Writer.

From our perspective, it is incredible to ponder Luther's energy and courage. He didn't set out to found a new denomination, but that's how it ended up.

Luther attacked many aspects of the Church's theology of the day – Indulgences, corruption, the fencing of the Eucharist, but we remember most his reading of Paul – his eyes opening to what seemed to remain hidden to others – we read this in Romans 3 – **we are justified before God by faith in Christ – and this is not our own doing, it is the gift of grace.**

**Grace-faith-justification in and through Christ** – the blessing of the Triune God, not the work of Popes and Bishops and Clerics.

If Luther's passion could be summed up in one word it would be **Freedom**. **If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed!** And the world began to change.

My tradition is Reformed/Presbyterian and so I need to mention John Calvin. The first thing is that he was not Scottish, but French – Jean Calvin. He was a Professor of Law at the University of Paris and much drawn to the emerging theology spreading in Europe and championed by Luther. The oppression of the French Reformers was unbearable, so he escaped to Basel and later to Geneva.

This is another feature of the Reformation – **PLACE**. Both Luther and Calvin survived because certain political leaders protected them. Luther within certain principalities in Germany; Calvin's followers had Geneva, Basel and Strasburg.

It was Calvin's security that allowed him to reach out to Scots, English, Dutch and Hungarian reformers who studied in Geneva.

Calvin also read the Letter to the Romans as well and agreed with Luther on issues of justification, grace and faith.

Calvin also stressed the **Sovereignty of God** – over all the earth, over all our destinies. And this led to his theology of Predestination – God governs our fate – and thus our salvation. Calvin's reading of Paul seemed to indicate that God destined some for eternal salvation and others to damnation. Calvin called it a **Horrible Doctrine – he simply could not refute it.**

My take on Calvin is this:

**He was a very clear thinker.** His Institutes of the Christian Religion are articulate, readable, and succinct.

But **Calvin was betrayed by the later Calvinists** – especially the Puritans who turned his liberating theology into a moral strait jacket.

Today, we do not teach predestination, but rather **Election** – God calls people (often the most unexpected!) and equips them with the skills to teach and serve and lead.

An enduring legacy of Calvin is his **insistence on popular education**. John Knox took this teaching to Scotland and said children must be educated to read the Bible. This resulted in the Scottish prominence in the early years of the industrial revolution.

Calvin brought the Psalms back into worship and often preached from them. He loved the poetry and the invitation to dialogue with the Creator. He also preached many sermons from the Book of Acts – noting that most of Paul’s writings were from jail – and so were many of the Reformers, including Luther.

We understand that Luther and Calvin were supportive of each other in early days, but came to disagreement over the meaning of the Eucharist. Although Calvin and Melancthon remained friendly, I understand.

If Luther’s touchstone was **Freedom**, for Calvin it was **ORDER**. Not in an authoritarian manner but the belief that God is the God who brought order out of chaos (Genesis 1). You could only have a livable society and a functioning Church if there was a sense of order.

Interesting how freedom and order play off each other – need to be held in some sort of balance.

Luther and Calvin set out to reform the Church and ended up changing society. Most of all, both were open to the continuing revelation of God – the world was not a closed system destined to misery. Christ’s words were liberating, pointing to a new order, new possibilities. There was ENERGY where before there had been atrophy.

**As we look at our world today, it seems we have entered a new age of anxiety.**

Covid 19 has put the world in a state of stasis, even of shock. This was not anticipated – not even possible, we might have thought in 2019. Anxiety increases.

Trust in governments has declined and people are turning to charismatic authoritarians/contrarians.

Scientific and medical wisdom is being challenged.

The Church has very little influence on affairs of state. Everyone can find their own religious guidance via the internet.

The Reformation had Gutenberg; we have Zuckerberg! The freedom and promise of the internet has become a tool of Orwellian nightmares – feasting on deception and fear..

In Luther’s day the rich could buy indulgences to get into heaven. Today the rich are flying rockets to heaven.

Polemics are everywhere – we are divided, suspicious.

Today is Reformation Day, All Saints Day, Hallowe’en and the beginning of COP26 (Greta Thunberg Day)– held in Glasgow where there is a garbage strike. The air will not be fresh and Greta Thunberg is afraid of more Blah, Blah, Blah.

The Pandemic baby boom didn't happen – many young families are afraid of the future.

It seems to me that this is the time for the Church to find its passion and voice for this year of our Lord. This is not something we can invent, but we can respond to the promptings of the Spirit as we look deeply into Christ's teachings and example. Theology is important, but it must serve the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. That Lutherans and Reformed/Presbyterians had disagreements in 1650, doesn't mean they must still separate us.

It is time for the Church – again – in this age of anxiety – to become free, passionate and courageous. And live the Gospel of freedom, justice and restore the good order of God's creation.

An anxious world needs a courageous Church.