



WESTMINSTER
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Catholics and Protestants: 500 Years Together

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For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Five hundred years ago this Tuesday, on October 31, 1517, according to tradition, the Roman Catholic monk Martin Luther tacked 95 theses on the chapel door in Wittenberg, Germany, and lit the match that ignited the Protestant Reformation.

Historians know that's an oversimplified, and perhaps not entirely accurate, account of what really happened, but we also know that history is always more complicated than popular legend and tradition, and yet, many of our traditions carry enough truth to be worth preserving.

There's some debate about whether Luther literally tacked his theses on the chapel door at Wittenberg, but it makes for dramatic imagery, as on the cover of our worship bulletin this morning. We know that Luther did propose his theses for reforming the Catholic Church, and he, more than any other individual, set fire to a mound of reformation kindling that had been piling up in front of the Church for a great many years.

October 31 is significant because it's All Hallows' Eve, the day before All Saints' Day. What we now call Halloween, and think of mostly as a day to dress up in costumes and solicit candy from the neighbors, was once a time when people imagined that scary spirits came out at

night because they knew that on the next day, All Saints' Day, heaven would display more power than any of them could bear to witness. So All Hallows' Eve, 1517, is as good a day as any to mark the start of the Protestant Reformation, a great movement to renew the power and vitality of the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Reformation became an enormously complicated affair, including personal, political, ethnic, and economic, as well as religious, considerations – which is often the case in conflicts described as purely religious disputes. But for our purpose this morning we can focus on just two things: the basic Reformation claims about the nature of Christian faith, and the way that, after 500 years, Catholics and Protestants for the most part are healing the wounds of division, and modeling a kind of reconciliation that our world so desperately needs today.

First, the great claims of the Reformation.

In Luther's day, there was a lot of corruption in the Roman Catholic Church, including some popes and bishops and priests who not only failed to embody Christian principles but sometimes seemed not to care about them at all in the way they lived. The Church had become fabulously rich, and some of its leaders behaved more like secular princes than disciples of Christ. To support the building of great cathedrals and other costly ventures, the Church sold what were called "indulgences." The idea was that people who made special contributions could shorten the time that loved ones spent in Purgatory, the intermediate state after life on earth and that the Church said was necessary for souls to be purged of their sins before they were fit to enter heaven. Indulgences and other practices reinforced the impression that Christians could, in some sense, earn their

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way into heaven by doing good works prescribed by the church.

Martin Luther was one of those religious souls, like St. Paul in the first century and countless other male and female saints through the ages, who were eager to please God, to live a life worthy of the calling of Christ, as Paul put it in his letters. Luther was relentlessly honest in his moral and spiritual self-awareness, and the harder he tried to be faithful to God, the more clearly he saw how far he fell short. Luther came to realize that he could never earn his way to heaven because, left to his own devices, he could never fully live as God would have him live.

In the midst of his moral and spiritual anguish, Luther was struck by the emphasis in scripture, and especially the writings of Paul, that none of us can earn our way into heaven, but we don't need to, because if we're saved at all, we're saved by the grace of God alone, who comes in Christ to accomplish for us what we could never achieve by ourselves. One of the most concise summaries of this insight comes from the letter to the Ephesians: "... by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

Luther began to see the whole of Christian faith as one great life of gratitude in response to God's grace, and he found that revelation to be enormously liberating. He didn't have to carry around a burden of guilt for not measuring up, because his salvation depended not on his own goodness but on God's goodness and grace. Grace is unmerited favor. We're treated better than we deserve, by the sheer lovingkindness of God. And God wants everyone

to be saved, if only we're willing to trust in God's goodness and live our lives accordingly, which is the essence of faith.

By grace we're saved through faith. We can't earn our way into heaven, but we don't have to, because salvation is a free gift from God in Jesus Christ. The more Luther realized this biblical principle, the more skeptical he became about any claims of the Church that could not be found in scripture. So indulgences, for example, struck him as contrary to scripture, because they implied that people could earn salvation by doing good works. And Purgatory itself was a dubious doctrine, because the Bible doesn't describe an intermediate state where we need to work off our sins. We can't justify ourselves by works in Purgatory any more than we can do it here in this life; and besides, Jesus tells the penitent thief on the cross next to him at Golgotha, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

A motto of the Reformation came to be *sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura* – we're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, and scripture is the sole source of what we need to know about God's plan for our salvation. The Reformation ultimately had an enormous impact on life in Western Europe and North America in all sorts of ways, and not just in religion. The principle of *sola scriptura* meant that the Bible should be translated into languages that ordinary people spoke, and everyone should be taught to read so they could discover the truths of scripture for themselves. To that end, Luther first translated the Bible into German, and before long Protestants were translating it into English and French and most of the world's major languages. The rapid spread of literacy, fueled by Protestant theology and the new technology of the printing press, contributed enormously to the economic and cultural development of the world; and the Protestant notion of the "priesthood of all believers"

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contributed to the democratizing impulse of the Western world as well.

In our Presbyterian tradition, a branch of the Protestant Reformation, we have a saying, “*Reformata, semper reformanda*” – reformed, and always reforming. That is, the church continues to proclaim the classic affirmations of the Christian faith, while always being alert to the movement of the Holy Spirit as God’s redeeming, reconciling work continues throughout all of history.

A central part of God’s redemption is the gradual reconciliation of Catholics and Protestants, after many years of bitter and even deadly conflict that was always contrary to the spirit of Christ. Today the Roman Catholic Church has clarified in its own teaching that salvation is indeed a gift of God, not something any of us can earn – that we are, as Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and other Protestants insisted, saved by grace through faith. At the same time, the Catholic Church continues to teach, quite rightly, that if Christian faith is genuine, it will necessarily lead to good works, which are the inevitable fruit of faithfulness to God. Jesus said you can tell a tree by its fruit, and he meant that people who claim to be faithful but bear no fruit in the way they live are not really faithful at all. The very next verse in Ephesians, after reminding us that we’re saved by grace through faith alone, goes on to say “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” And of course the New Testament letter of James puts the whole matter succinctly: “Faith without works is dead.”

I know Roman Catholics who sound like Protestants when they talk about how salvation is a gift of God’s grace, and their whole lives are filled with gratitude. And I know

more than a few Protestants who sound like the old, false stereotype of Catholics when they talk as though they expect to get to heaven because they're pretty good people after all. We'll close our service this morning by singing "Amazing Grace," but the truth is that, for many Protestants as well as some Catholics, grace isn't all that amazing because they somehow imagine they deserve to be saved. They think God gives them credit for trying to be conventionally decent human beings, and so in effect they earn their way into heaven. Grace is not amazing when we don't really believe we need it, and it's hard to feel grateful when we think we deserve every good thing we have, including salvation itself. But to those who know that all good things are gifts from God, grace is amazing indeed.

Catholics and Protestants have come a long way toward each other in the last 500 years, and that's a sign of God's redeeming work in this world. We still disagree about some things – the exact nature of the sacraments, the role of pope and the Roman magisterium, the reality of Purgatory, the ordination of women, and unmarried clergy, for example – but on the whole, Catholics and Protestants love and respect one another as brothers and sisters in Christ more fully today than ever before, and our mutual acceptance continues to grow year by year.

And that brings me briefly to the other major point this morning, which is that the reconciliation of Catholics and Protestants can serve as a model for reconciliation and mutual acceptance across all kinds of boundaries in our world today. We live in a time when people are not only deeply divided about all sorts of differences, but there are influential groups and individuals who stoke and aggravate those differences for their own social or economic or political gain.

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The Spirit of Christ is a spirit of reconciliation and redemption, not a spirit of bitterness and hatred and strife. If Catholics and Protestants can resolve long-standing conflicts, and heal old wounds, and love one another while acknowledging the differences that still exist between us, we can show the world how faith, hope, and love are possible even in the midst of our disagreements.

We don't all have to be the same in order to get along. We don't all have to agree, even on things as important as religion and the means of salvation. We only have to believe that God is love, and that while we were still sinners Christ died for us, in order to know that love makes the first move on the path to reconciliation.

We don't have to wait for everyone else to love us before we start loving them. We know that's true, because God came looking for us long before we ever went looking for God. By grace we are saved through faith, the scripture tells us. It's only by grace that anyone is saved, in this world or the next, because grace is what love does, and the Bible says that the God who made every one of us is love.



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