

## Grace

The tradition goes that 500 years ago this coming Tuesday, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, a young university professor and monk, frustrated with the abuses of the church in his time, took his 95 theses, or 95 complaints, or 95 thoughts, and nailed them to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg.

His greatest frustration had to do with the sale of indulgences, those slips of paper issued from the Pope, that would shorten the sentence of the believer's judgement in purgatory. You could buy an indulgence for yourself or for a loved one, all in the hopes of money well-spent in getting into heaven faster. These indulgences, along with an elaborate system of venerating relics, the supposed ancient bones of saints or pieces of wood from the cross of Christ, along with daily acts of penance, were guarantees for salvation of the soul.

You only had to do enough, or pay enough, and you would attain salvation.

Last year, I sat in St. Mary's church in Wittenberg, the one in which Martin Luther loved to preach. That Sunday morning the female pastor climbed the steps into the pulpit and delivered a sermon that spoke of the plight of refugees streaming into Germany, what the church was doing and called to do as a response to these women, men and children literally walking away from the terror of civil war, from gnawing fear and hunger. I listened as she preached the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ who welcomed, who challenged, who forgave, and who offered his strength and grace to bear good fruit for the kingdom.



*The original Cranach Reformation Altar adorns St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, Germany.  
(LCMS/Erik M. Lunsford)*

As she preached, behind her over by the altar, stood the Cranach triptych. This is a series of painted panels by the Reformation artist, Lucas Cranach the Elder. The triptych held three scenes above and one below.

On the top left, the panel was a depiction of an infant baptism. On the top right was a scene of confession. And in the centre, the painting showed the last supper, only this time among the disciples, sat Luther. And underneath these three panels, is the supporting panel of Luther preaching from the pulpit, his hand on the scriptures. In it, the congregation listens to him from the other side of the sanctuary; in between them is Jesus, crucified.

Luther's finger points to the cross.

It's a great, artistic piece of propaganda for the Reformation. Installed in the church in 1547, a year after Luther died, it reiterates the story of the true church, making sure to hit all those solas that Luther wrote about: Christ alone, scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, to God the glory alone.

Most often, when each Reformation Sunday rolls around, we take pride in that story as Lutherans. Most years, we haul out Luther, that lone pastor and university professor who stood up to the tremendous authority of the church - to all those centuries of tradition and councils and popes - and who lived to tell about it. And who wrote about it, in volumes.

This year is a bit different as we commemorate this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The way we are telling the story has less to do with propaganda, less to do with celebration, and more to do with truth and healing and reconciliation.

In this 500<sup>th</sup> year, as Lutherans we recognize that the movements brought about by Luther's reforms were also the cause of serious divisions within the church catholic. We recognize that the Reformation and the social movement it stirred, was cause for bloody warfare and religious intolerance and persecution.

In 1524 peasants and farmers, spurred on by Luther's writings on the freedom of a Christian, revolted. The crackdown by the nobility was brutal and supported by Luther. Casualties in the Peasant's War totalled between 100,000 and 300,000. It didn't end there: ongoing strife over religious authority, and land and wealth, led to the Thirty Years war as Catholics and Protestants battled it out, with over 8 million dead in Europe. The church and the Western world had split and splintered.

We can today, still, lift up Luther up as a man who stood his ground, guided by his conscience, a gifted scholar and a prolific writer, whose ideas of individual religious freedom, of education and literacy, were a renewing force in the church and in society, but we do remember the heavy toll paid as his ideas spread, including his hateful ideas of the Jewish people, writings we as the Lutheran church have rejected and repudiated.

But that bottom panel that Cranach painted for the altar holds true for the church today and continues to be a point of commonality and healing. The centre and the support of that bottom panel is the crucified Jesus. Without this person and this event, without the resurrection that followed, there is no church, Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox.

John's gospel, that we heard today, Luther's favourite, points us to this person and these events, as do the other gospel accounts.

In John we hear of this Jesus who calls ordinary people to leave what they are doing to follow him. Jesus who listens to the Pharisee Nicodemus' questions under the shadow of night and helps him to see God's love for the world. This Jesus who takes the time to have a conversation with an outsider, a woman no less, who questions him and who suspects he is the Messiah, the promised one.

Jesus who feeds 5,000 by the sea, simply because they are hungry and they have nowhere to go.

Who bends down and writes something in the sand, asking whoever has no sin to throw the first stone, showing mercy to the woman brought before him to be condemned by the crowd.

Jesus who with mud and spit gives back a man his sight.

This Jesus who kneels at his disciples' feet and washes the dirt and the tiredness away.

This Jesus who speaks to us of this abiding together, in love for one another, and in love for the God who sent him.

This Jesus who no longer calls us slaves, but friends.

Jesus who will give his life so that we will live.

In this life is the grace that Luther found so desperately, so frantically, as he searched the scriptures for a God he could love.

This grace walked the earth over 2,000 years ago and grace spread willy nilly, extravagantly, indiscriminately to insignificant women and hated Samaritans and condemned adulterers and despised tax collectors and self-righteous Pharisees and simple fishermen.

This grace was for sinners. It was for the sick and broken. It was for Luther and it is for us, for you, for me, and for all whose trust in God is written on their hearts.

Rachel Held Evans writes this in her book “Searching for Sunday:” “Two thousand years later, John [the Baptist’s] call remains a wilderness call, a cry from the margins. Because we religious types are really good at building walls and retreating to temples. We’re good at making mountains out of our ideologies, obstructions out of theologies, and hills out of our screwed up notions of who’s in and who’s out, who’s worthy and who’s unworthy. We’re good at getting in the way. Perhaps we’re afraid that if we move, God might use people and methods we don’t approve of, that rules will be broken and theologies questioned. Perhaps we’re afraid that if we get out of the way, this grace thing might get out of hand. Well, guess what? It already has. Grace got out of hand the moment God of the universe hung on a Roman cross and with outstretched hands looked out upon those who had hung him there and declared, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ Grace has been out of hand for more than two thousand years now. We best get used to it.”

Amen.