

## **Sermon Bytes: Giving From the Heart**

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The last Sunday of October is celebrated in Protestant Churches as Reformation Sunday. You know the Reformation – the birth of the Protestant church. Although there had been significant earlier attempts to reform the Roman Catholic Church – such as those in Czechoslovakia of Jan Hus, In France of Peter Waldo, and in England John Wycliffe – Martin Luther is widely acknowledged to have started the Reformation on October 31st 1517 when he nailed The Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg Germany.

Luther criticized the churches selling of indulgences, challenged the authority of the Pope in this life and the next and set the groundwork for two of Protestantism's foundational premises: that of looking to Scripture to understand our relationship with God (rather than acquiescing to the Church in Rome) and justification by faith (where people were brought into fellowship with God, not by the actions of the Church hierarchy, but by faith – which is both a gift from God and a result of cultivating a relationship with God).

But at the heart of the Luther's Reformation was the recognition that he had been worshiping the wrong God. We had been taught to see and fear - a God of holiness and justice, a God who expected righteousness and punished those who could not meet that standard. Jesus, from this point of view, was, the one who stood in and took the punishment we deserved.

Luther, agonizing over God's righteousness, finally realized that righteousness isn't the standard God sets for us, but rather is the gift God gave to us. Righteousness isn't a requirement but a promise. The God Luther expected was all about justice; the God he met in Jesus was all about love.

Jesus, it turns out, didn't die to make God forgiving but died to show us how forgiving God already is. Little wonder that Luther would later describe meeting this unexpected God by saying it was like having the gates of heaven opened

A pastor recently shared a story that when one member of her youth group asked her friends what they imagined Jesus thought about them, the overwhelming answer was disappointment. That is, they assumed Jesus and God were disappointed with them. Why? Because we still define God in terms of righteousness, sin, punishment and the like.

The reformation was about opening the heavens for all people. Luther was surprised – by God's unexpected salvation and grace. It's a message that still needs to be heard : God sees us, God accepts us, God loves us, and God brings us home. No exceptions!

Ernest Hemingway wrote a poignant short story called "The Capital of the World". In it he tells about a Spanish father whose son who has run away to Madrid. Not sure how to

find him, he takes out an ad in the El Liberal newspaper: "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven. Love, Papa."

Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the square, he finds 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers. As Hemingway goes on to explain, the young men were drawn by the words "All is forgiven." The father did not say, "All WILL BE forgiven IF you do this ...." or, "All WILL BE forgiven WHEN you do that...." He simply says, "All is forgiven." No strings attached.

And that's the hard part – un-attaching the strings. Wiki-dictionary tells us that the oldest understanding of the saying "no strings attached" goes back to Babylon when documents were written on parchment that had to be rolled up and were then secured with a string. Even though the document was written and signed, it was not complete until the document had been rolled and tied and handed over. Until then the terms were not legal but of course it's never that simple

The Babylonian Talmud – a record of Israel's exile in Babylon tells of a man who gives his wife a bill of divorce on such a parchment, but he ties it with a long string so that he can snatch it back, should he choose to do so and thus keep her dangling. Until he did, the divorce was not considered valid since he would not let go of the attached strings

An unknown author beautifully portrays the possibilities of no-strings-attached love in this heartfelt story titled "The Rock.":

As she grew up, a young woman became increasingly rebellious. It culminated late one night when the police arrested her for drunk driving. Mom had to go to the police station to pick her up. They didn't speak until the next afternoon. Mom broke the tension by giving her a small gift- wrapped box. Her daughter nonchalantly opened it and found a little rock inside.

She rolled her eyes and said, "Cute, Mom, what's this for?" "Read the card," Mom instructed. Her daughter took the card out of the envelope and read it. And began to weep.

On the card were these words: "This rock is more than 200,000,000 years old. That is how long it will take before I give up on you."

This mother is not saying, "I will love you IF..." Instead she says that she will love her daughter forever and nothing can change that. No strings attached.

That is what Luther discovered and shared with the church as the opening salvo of the reformation. God is not there to judge us, but rather to love us. Not trying to get us to measure us by some Heavenly yard stick of right and wrong, but rather inviting us to acknowledge God and to receive God's grace and to share that transformative love with the world around us.

Paul was perhaps the first apologist for the church and often got his message across to the early church by a combination of convoluted logic and indecipherable rhetoric. But here in Paul's writing to the early church, Eugene Peterson unpacks the words. He says that sharing is not a requirement of the faith. It is a heartfelt response of faith. Paul invites the members of the Church at Corinth to become part of the response, to the tremendous need of the church in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was in turmoil as The Emperor Claudius had expelled Jews and with them some Christians from Rome and many had returned to the Holy Land, straining the always fragile resources of the area.

The local resources of the church had been overtaxed and Paul encouraged the wider community to offer what they could to the work of the Kingdom, to share what they could that all might have enough. Such has been the premise of Christian Stewardship throughout the ages, that all join in the work of the Kingdom by sharing from the gifts of grace that God has put into their hands – to steward on behalf of the Kingdom of God.

As Luther might say, the gates to the kingdom of heaven are once again opened when those who have received God's love and grace turn around and share those gifts in the name of the love and grace, thereby planting a new crop of hope, and grace and love in the hearts of those they meet by sharing of what has first been given to them.

As Paul would say, let us give from the heart, because such a response brings joy and hope and peace, for such is the kingdom of God