

WGUMC September 24, 2017 "Our Inner Luther"
Galatians 2:15-21

I have to admit that "A Mighty Fortress" is not my favorite hymn. Probably not yours. The theme is a bit dark. There's a "flood of mortal ills" in "this world with devils filled." Makes you wonder about the psyche of the hymn's author. Martin Luther has been the subject of a lot of psychological speculation, but he wouldn't seem so disturbed if we knew something of his historical context, which was pretty disturbing.

Luther was born in 1483, at the tail end of the Medieval Age. The feudal system that kept pope, prince, and peasant in their places was still in force but starting to falter. Less than a century earlier, the Black Death had swept over Europe and killed upwards of 50 million people, as much as half of the population on the continent. The plague hit especially hard in Germany. It would take 150 years to repopulate the region.

Death was all too familiar for fifteenth-century families. Two of Luther's brothers died during local outbreaks of the plague. So he saw firsthand how someone can be perfectly healthy *one* day and dead in less than *ten*. No one knew how the disease spread. The devil was a likely suspect. But many assumed that the devil was only doing God's dirty work. They saw the plague as God's punishment brought down on a sinful people.

That was Martin Luther's world. Now we can understand his song. After seeing so much temporary suffering, Luther was obsessed—that's not too strong a word—with the question of how one could escape eternal torment. How could one be sure that they were ever confessing every sin and be certain of salvation?

As a young man, he got caught in a violent thunderstorm, and he was sure that God had caught him. He prayed to St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary: "Save me...and I will

become a monk!" He survived the storm, and much to the dismay of his family, he left law school, sold his books, and entered an Augustinian monastery in 1505.

But becoming a monk didn't give Luther the assurance he was looking for. He went to confession constantly, but could not get out of his spiritual despair. Looking back on this time in his life, he said, "I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul."

His superior decided that the best thing to do would be to give Luther something besides his own sin to occupy his mind, and he appointed him to teach biblical theology at the newly formed University of Wittenburg. He began to study the Bible and it became clear to Luther that what the Bible said about salvation wasn't what the Church was teaching.

To Luther, it appeared that whereas St. Paul had declared all Christians to be free in Christ, the Church was intent on

enslaving them all over again. Over time the Church had simply substituted one regime of laws for another. Paul was a good Jew and therefore he knew that a person is not justified—or made right with God—simply by obeying the law. That was a common misunderstanding of the function of the law and Paul knew better. But Paul was also a Christian. That meant that he believed that he was justified through faith in Jesus Christ. In his words, Paul had died to the law so that he might live to God. So intensely did Paul identify with Christ that he even said that his old self, his not-centered-in-God self, had been crucified with Christ. Thus it was no longer Paul who lived, but Christ who lived in him.

This and other passages in Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans became the basis of Martin Luther's conviction that our salvation comes not by our works but by way of grace through faith and faith alone. A Christian did not need anything

else the Church was selling. And at that time in history, it was selling a lot of things.

While he was preparing to teach theology, Luther made a trip to Rome in 1510. There he saw with his own eyes what the sale of indulgences was doing to soul of the Church. It was shocking to see how the whole system was corrupting the clergy and even more importantly, wounding the laity. In 1517, Pope Leo X started an aggressive campaign of selling time off purgatory to pay for the building of St. Peter's Basilica. His top salesman was Johann Tetzel, who Luther quoted as saying: "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs."

Luther wrote down his objections to the sale of indulgences and many other concerns that he had about the state of the Church and the salvation of souls. Ninety-five theses in all were reportedly nailed to the door of the cathedral

in Wittenburg. Luther thought that he was inviting scholarly debate on his declaration. Instead, he was starting a revolution.

It began as a media war. Like politicians who don't know how to control information in the age of Facebook and Twitter, Luther hadn't planned on his ideas going global. But with the recent invention of the printing press, his words were soon set loose on the world.

I have to take a side trip here to say that we don't want to listen to all of Luther's words. Some of them were not repeatable. When the Reformation in the Church sparked a revolt among the peasants, Luther told the German princes they could draw their swords. They would have God to guide them. In the end, over 100,000 peasants were slaughtered in the uprising. Not only that, but he said really despicable things about Jews. While he didn't advocate genocide, his words would be ringing in the ears of those who centuries later did. I cannot excuse Martin Luther by saying that he was just shaped

by the violence and anti-semitism of his time. Still, God used this flawed man to give us a message for eternity.

Luther's focus on faith—not the Church's faith, not the pope's faith—but the individual believer's faith was the fuel for the fire that became known as the Reformation. But its impact went far beyond the Church. This new focus on the individual is arguably the foundation of modern Western Civilization. From individual faith comes a belief in individual rights and from a notion of individual rights comes a yearning for political, economic and religious freedom and from freedom comes the long march to democracy. So regardless of religion, on the inside of every American is a little bit of Martin Luther.

Luther said that salvation is not the business of the Church, but the business of every believer, and he put the individual soul front and center. A person didn't need a priest to mediate salvation for them. In fact, we are all our own priest

for our own soul, because through faith we have direct contact to Christ, the author of salvation.

The promises of the Gospel are not for popes but for the people, for you and for me. After five centuries of taking this truth for granted, it's hard for Protestants to understand how very radical this was, how very powerful Luther's words were. In fact, one of the most famous conversions of all time took place as Luther's words were being read aloud:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

This is what John Wesley wrote in his Journal on May 24, 1738. So you can credit Martin Luther for not only starting the Reformation but also kick-starting the greatest revival movement since the Reformation. The truth that God's grace is

for me and all I have to do is believe it, all I have to do is receive it, is the simplest truth there is. It's also the hardest, because we are desperate to hold onto the notion that we are going to earn our way to salvation. Our stubborn pride has dictated to us that there is a work we must do, a price we must pay, a sacrifice we must make, or a person we must become before God will love us. Meritocracy is our ideology. It is the religion of Silicon Valley.

So it was ironic that I found myself in the belly of the beast as I prepared to write this sermon. Normally, I like to walk labyrinths that are far from freeways, preferably in the forest. But on Friday, I was at the labyrinth at the Plaza del Sol in downtown Sunnyvale. Cal Train was coming and going. Cars were passing. Young techies were sitting around and walking through the plaza, hunched over their phones. And it dawned on me that almost every one of them probably believes that they have to earn their way to happiness. If they just put in

enough hours, sacrifice enough sleep, skip enough meals, neglect enough relationships, somehow the gods of Silicon Valley will reward them.

But they are putting their faith in false gods. Luther says that the God of Jesus Christ doesn't work that way. The real God puts the last first. So we don't have to be and maybe we shouldn't want to be first in line all the time. This God blesses the poor. We don't have to get our kid into Stanford. God has made human beings and crowned them with glory and honor. We don't have to get our body into that swimsuit. This God shows us the power in weakness. We don't have to pretend to be strong. This God will give us a whole new self. We don't have to worry that our old one isn't good enough. In fact, we don't have to do anything to convince God to love us. God already does. If there's a problem, it's that we don't love ourselves enough to believe it.

In that case, we'll just have to pray for the faith to believe it, for faith isn't a work we do but something God works in us.

In Luther's words:

Faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace; it is so certain, that someone would die a thousand times for it. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace. [From Luther's *Preface to Romans*]

Five hundred years later, this is the faith that we are still praying for, the faith that warms the heart, reforms the Church and transforms the world. Come, fairest Lord Jesus.