

The Bible Study that Changed the World

A Sermon on Romans 1:16-17 by Rich Holmes

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500 years is a long time. Just to keep things in perspective, 500 years ago, no one had yet arrived on this side of the globe who spoke English. 500 years ago no one yet knew about oxygen, or viruses, or germs or vaccines, or that the earth revolves around the sun. And in this world of jets that can travel three times the speed of sound, it is worth noting that 500 years ago the fastest way to travel was on the back of a galloping horse. 500 years is a long time and when something comes around only once every five hundred years, I think it is worth stopping whatever it is we're doing and taking notice of. So let us take a day today to stop and notice that five hundred years ago this Tuesday, Martin Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses* which he nailed on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Why is this worth celebrating? It is worth celebrating because this event is usually marked as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

It is almost impossible to overstate the influence that Luther has had on our modern faith. Most everyone who has gone through confirmation knows that it is because of Luther that you and I are not worshipping today in a Catholic mass. The whole Protestant branch of Christianity was only possible because of Luther. But Luther's impact is not just limited to us Protestants. We also cannot go back to the Catholic Church as it was before the time of Luther. And as the lecturers at Walsh University reminded our community in recent weeks, our Jewish and Muslim friends can't even go back to their original faith before the time of Luther. It is no exaggeration at all to say that modern faith would not be modern faith without Luther. And here is something else we owe to Luther that you may not have considered. Today if you are happy

that we don't have to worship in some secret location, but with a sign out front that boldly tells the world that we are Northminster Presbyterian Church, you can thank Luther for that as well. The whole idea of religious toleration and religious freedom would not have been possible were it not for Luther.

Luther's impact on this world and on our faith was enormous to say the least. But the story of Luther is not the story of an ambitious sixteenth century man who sought such fame and glory. The story of Luther is instead the story of one person who simply read the bible and read it carefully.

Luther's life you might say, was a quest, and a quest to find the answer to a question he could not stop asking himself. This was the question of how he could find peace with God. The problem for Luther started when he was a young boy and he was frequently whipped for not learning his school lessons. This strict and even abusive upbringing for Luther gave him a deep sense of guilt, and a deep sense of guilt because from an early age, Luther came to associate God with those in authority over him who would use this kind of abusive discipline. So in his quest to overcome this guilt and find peace, when he became a young man, Luther decided to become a monk, and for the first time in his life he thought he had found the peace he was looking for. But it only lasted for a little while. The time came for Luther to preside over a mass with communion, and as he held the communion host in his hand, he was overcome with a sense of fear that he was too sinful and too unworthy to be holding the very body of Christ. So Luther began to go to confession and he began to go more and more to try to get rid of all his sins and be sure they were forgiven. This also worked for a time, but then he began to worry about what would happen to him if he committed some sin he had forgotten about. How was

he sure he remembered all his sins? Sometimes he would leave the confessional and as soon as he left, he would have the memory of some sin which he forgot to confess and this horrified him. Some people who knew of Luther's struggles then tried to tell him he didn't need to confess all his sins, all he needed to do was love God, and this was the path to peace with God. But he said to himself if God is no different from the people who whipped him when he was a boy, if God was always looking to punish him for some sin, how could he love God? How could he do anything but hate God?

So the journey, the quest continued, and finally one day, Luther was lecturing on Paul's letter to the Romans, which is just to say that he was leading what we would call a bible study. All at once Luther had a great insight. He was studying our New Testament reading for today, from Romans Chapter 1 and when he got to verse 17 he read both "in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed", and "it is written: the righteous will live by faith." This verse didn't make any sense to Luther. He believed that the gospel was somehow good news, but he didn't understand how the gospel could be good news if it revealed the righteousness of God. The righteousness of God was the very thing that terrified him. And what about the second part? Why did the righteous need to live by faith if they had righteousness? Why wasn't their righteousness enough? Luther studied this verse day and night. And finally one day it hit him like a bolt out of the blue: the good news of the gospel had nothing to do with the punishment of sinners, but the good news of the gospel was that the righteousness of sinners was not their own but God's. The good news of the gospel to Luther in other words, was that if you had faith in God, God's righteousness was a free gift to you. Well, Luther was amazed at this insight and as he began to share these ideas publically what he found was that rather than deciding was

crazy or deluded, people were receptive to his reading of the bible, so receptive in fact, that his insights changed the world.

The story of Luther is of course the story about what it means to be a Protestant and it is the story behind everything that we believe as Protestants, but I think it is the story of something far more important than that. When I was in Seminary, I remember one time I was reading the bible and I found something there I had never noticed before. For the life of me, I don't remember what it was now. There have been dozens of times since then when I discovered something in the bible that amazed me. But I remember I was so excited that I ran up to Walter Brueggemann's study and banged on his door and I said "Professor Brueggemann, you gotta know what I just found out for myself! Here's what this passage means!" Well, Dr. Brueggemann listened to me and looked at me over his bi-focals, and without saying whether he agreed with me or not, he simply said, "Mr. Holmes, I think what you've really discovered is that when you look closely at the bible, you never know what you're going to find."

Everything this day is about, everything this 500th anniversary is about is all because someone decided to read the bible carefully without deciding in advance what it actually said. Someone decided to read the bible without some preconceived notion about it based on what someone else told him it said. Now, in telling you this, I am not suggesting that if you just read the bible carefully enough and know it well enough that five hundred years from now we'll be talking about you instead of Luther. But listen to the words of Professor Brueggemann; 'You do not know, you never know what you're going to find in the bible if you just look closely enough and you look carefully enough.'

I know that every one of us here at Northminster leads busy lives. And I am a long way from being retired, but I even have retired people tell me how busy they are. They tell me that they thought retirement would mean sitting on the porch in their rocking chair all day, but when they retired they found out it was quite different. They are busy with grandkids and doctor's appointments and specialists, repairing this broken car and that broken furnace, and all of this is to say nothing of the fact that when you are retired, everyone thinks you don't have anything to do so they call you up and ask for some commitment from you, right. So I know that even if you are retired, you lead a busy life. The fact is we are all busy here at Northminster; we all lead busy lives. And one of the things we do when we are busy is that we outsource. We get someone else to do things for us. We may get someone else to prepare our meals for us. We may get someone else to do our yardwork for us. We may get someone else to walk our dog for us. We outsource all kinds of things in our lives when we are busy. But do not decide that you are so busy that you have to outsource your faith. Do not let someone else read the bible for you and tell you what it says. Do not let someone else decide for you what God is saying to you in the bible, because I promise you they will never, never be 100 percent right. And even if they are 99 percent right, I promise it is that one percent that will surprise you. It is that one percent that matters.

You may wonder to yourself, how in the world did it take until 1517 for someone to discover this great insight that Luther had—this great insight of justification by faith. Why did everyone else miss that? Well, the truth is that people didn't really read the bible before Luther's time. The printing press was a brand new invention in Luther's time and so before his time the only people who had access to a bible were the priest and the clergy, the people in the

churches didn't have bibles. And the standard bible up until Luther's time was in Latin so unless you were educated enough to understand Latin, you didn't know how to read it.

I am sometimes afraid we are going back to that time. I am sometimes afraid that in the church the bible is a book that is more to be admired than read. It is more a book to dust off and revere than it is to use. That doesn't mean there is no reading going on in churches these days. I know that many people read books like *Left Behind*, *The Shack* and *The Purpose Driven Life* just to name a few. I have no doubt that they inspire many people and they may have even changed some people's lives. But while these books may have a lot to do with the bible, they are not the bible. They are no more the bible than a painting of Christ is Christ himself.

I am afraid we are going back to the time before Luther, but we don't have to be that way. We have a choice. What would the church look like if we stopped outsourcing our faith? What would we look like if we stopped reading about the bible and actually started reading the bible. I think we would see a new day, a new birth. If there is any way to tell the story of God's people, it is as a story of a people who have always thought that the same stale, dead faith couldn't possibly live again. But just when they'd completely given up on the faith ever living again, God raised it up from the grave. That is the story of the prophets when the priests of the Old Testament had lost their way. It is the story of the Puritans when the Church of England had lost its way. It is the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church when the German Christians had lost their way. It is a story in which Martin Luther is just one chapter. And on this 500th anniversary of Luther's Reformation, let us remember it can be our story as well.