

*For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.* This nugget from Paul's letter to the Romans may not seem like a major breakthrough, but it is the insight and inspiration that led Martin Luther to nail the 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Thus, 500 years ago, the Reformation began. And, one could argue, things have not been the same ever since.

Indeed, the church has gone through half a millennia of change. Some good, much of it the very antithesis of the "gospel" that he espoused. Wars, schisms, divisions. It has not been pretty. I suspect that Luther would be amazed at the variety and diversity of expression that constitutes "church" in our day and age. He also would be surprised by the religious diversity that exists and the relative or active peaceful coexistence among traditions in many places. One could argue that this very world is, in part, the result of Luther's insight and action.

Basically, Luther is the prototype for the modern person. His theological discovery (borrowing from Paul) moved faith into a much more personal arena. The tie to family, clan, tribe, and nation--strong as that continues to be--begins to fray as the individual (and for Luther, the individual's salvation) takes center stage. Thus, the famous Latin phrases underscore the emerging individual nature of life and faith. *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *Sola Fide* (Faith alone), *Sola Gratia* (Grace alone) become foundational to how faith is understood, and very personal. One no longer needs the oversight or permission or ruling of the magisterium or an order of priests or the pope himself. One can decide for him or her self based on what lies within scripture and within one's heart.

And, for better or worse, one's heart and mind became the arbiter of what was true and real. The modern was born. At its best, the creed of the reformation and modernity is that my allegiance is to no one person, thing, or place. Reason and the search for truth are the highest ideals that shape my engagement with the world. Out of this we have an explosion of scientific thought, transforming the world. We evolve into constitutions, declarations of independence, and declarations of human rights that change the way that we see not only the world but our very selves and the other.

While such shifts have been critical for the freedoms that we recognize and experience, such shifts have also threatened to isolate us from others. While we understand intellectually the Donne's truism that, "no man is an island," we are also tempted by an ever increasing world that offers us what we want, when we want it, the way we want it, and with seeming no strings attached for getting it. The illusion of freedom and independence and autonomy are always on offer.

However, while Luther's insight of Paul's expression of God's gift of justification through the grace of Jesus the Christ is the lynchpin for the liberation of the self (we no longer live by the shame based system of the past but by the love of God for all), it does not find completion ultimately in the self. Indeed, the freedom that Luther recognized by stumbling upon Paul's wisdom is that he no longer needed to prove himself worthy before God (which could never happen), so that he was now freed to live and engage the world more fully with the gifts that God had given him, freed from that burden that had haunted him. Community, care of the other, sharing the grace he had received, seeing the imprint of the divine who loved him in the very world around him became the expressions that were part of Luther's make-up. He wasn't driven inward to solipsism. He was liberated to move outward.

And so are we.

Over the next two Sundays, we will hear from Frank Mastrone and Cathy Ostuw about *What St. Francis means to me*. They will offer us food for thought about not just the individual life that we live but the life that we share together. This will be followed by our annual stewardship mailing during the week of November 6. You will be invited to consider a pledge to support our collective work as a parish in 2018. I hope that you will join in as you are able. I also hope that your giving might be informed by Luther's insight. We are justified. You are justified. That is the relationship with the divine, the love of that divine for you is non-negotiable. Because of that, we need not live in the shame and guilt systems; rather we are freed to live. Live as individuals and to live into the fullness of our being. Yet also freed to live *with* others and *for* others, because we know that while God's love is for us, it also is for everyone. And God's hands are not spiritual appendages that descend from the heavens. God's hands are your hands. So, what will you do?