"Reformation and Transformations"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

October 29, 2017

Martin Luther was a 37-year old renegade monk when he was called to the Diet of Worms in 1521. Luther thought he was appearing for a debate. Instead, he found himself on trial. With all the weight of the Holy Roman Empire sitting across the table, Luther argued his ideas, defended his writings, and declared:

> Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason—for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves—I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen.

These are bold and brave words. In essence, he challenged the authority of Pope and Prince to tell him how the world worked. He said, I don't trust you and I don't need to follow you. Instead, I will turn to knowing God through scripture to the authority of conscience. It was an epic stand against power whose force can still be felt centuries later.

As Unitarian Universalists, our tradition flows from Luther's legacy. From the Reformation came the Puritans who settled these shores with their congregational ways—a church that looked to scripture and to the authority of the congregation to call its minister and to create the covenant that bonded the members to one another. And then, our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors questioned this Puritan Christianity they had inherited…much like Luther had questioned the inherited religion of his family and country. Luther's story is our story. It is a shared story of trying to make sense of the world in which we live, finding hope for the future, and daring to be bold in our struggle against corruption and falsehood.

A deep and sincere personal struggle drove Luther's religious questions. You may have heard the story about how he became a monk? While caught in a thunderstorm as a young man, Luther feared for his life. Riding horseback in the open countryside wasn't a great place to be in a big storm! Pleading in prayer to St. Anne, he pledged to become a monk if his life would be spared. Then, once a monk, he dove deeply into monastic practices of prayer, fasting, and study. Yet, he remained dissatisfied. Although he lived so carefully by the monastic order, following all the rules, engaging in all the practices, he was plagued

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with anxiety about his fate. Despite his efforts, he knew he would never be good enough, righteous enough, worthy enough to please God.

I wonder how many of us have found ourselves in similar situations. We throw all that we have at something we care deeply about—our parenting, our work, our marriage, our exercise, our art, our patience—and find that we simply will not ever measure up. We simply cannot resolve the problem. We can't do enough to make it right. And yet, we're doing everything we're told to do. What then? Where do we go for answers?

In Luther's world, the answers had always been understood to come from the top down—the priests and the princes, the Pope and the Emperor, had the ear of God. Answers and authority flowed through the powerful to the less powerful to the powerless—the poor and the hungry. By placing authority in the individual's conscience, Luther didn't just lead a reformation of religion, he ignited a revolt against the inherited powers of Church and State.

But he didn't mean to. He just had questions. Questions about the efficacy of buying indulgences—which meant paying money—to earn good credit with God of one's own or another's soul after death. Questions about how to truly earn good favor with God. Questions about how to find some peace within amidst questions of life and death, good and evil.

In our UU tradition, asking questions, following the threads of reason, are woven into who we are. But, what if we were not allowed to ask? What if asking questions, challenging the official answers, landed you in court, facing the powerful whose disapproval might cost you your life? This is where Luther found himself. And, in the face of such power, he nevertheless persisted.

Luther managed to avoid execution. Rather, he wed a runaway nun, Katherine, with whom he had six children; he continued to teach and write; and he ultimately died in 1546 from illness, and likely exhaustion, at the age of 62. During those decades from posting his 95 theses to his death, his questions and willingness to look somewhere else for answers transformed both religion and society.

I am a bit in awe that we are alive today to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation. Admittedly this may make me a bit of a religion geek. Yet, even as I lift up the massive significance of this anniversary, it is important to also say that there is plenty to be critical about in Luther and the other reformers. Luther was critical of populists who wanted to rise up against the local princes who protected him. Luther wrote viciously anti-

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Semitic things…writings used to justify hate and violence against Jews for centuries. John Calvin in Geneva executed Michael Servetus, another Protestant Reformer, for going too far in his theological reform by suggesting Jesus may not be divine—a position that foreshadowed our own Unitarian ancestors. No person is without sin and blemish, not even these giants of religious history.

Nor did these giants of the Reformation act alone. Luther relied on his wife Katie to run the household and welcome the ceaseless streams of visitors in search of education and counsel. There were whole networks of reformers who wrote and preached. And, there were so many people who were simply looking for a meaningful life of faith. These showed up quietly to worship services or perhaps with a willingness to defend their faith in another possible world—a world where the rich didn't have more advantages to buy the ear of God, in which faith alone might be enough, and where the pious life of a farmer or a merchant's wife might be as pleasing to God as that of a monk or nun. In this way, the Reformation was not simply about theologians, preachers, and princes, the Reformation was about vast populations seeking truth as well as a sense of meaning for their everyday lives and hope for their future.

Looking back today, some scholars have said that Luther's questions led not only to the questions against received tradition that fractured Christianity in thousands of pieces, but also to a skepticism that led many right out of the church and religion itself. Indeed, many of those Protestant denominations that Luther unwittingly helped to create are now on the decline in the U.S. and Europe. Such decline has prompted some to call for another 500-year transformation of religious life—to remake religion today just as Luther helped to remake Christianity in 1517.

But Luther did not set out to transform the whole world as he knew it. He only raised issues that troubled his conscience and he thought were harmful. He followed the restlessness of his spirit and the inconsistencies noted by his mind. He spoke up although he suffered ridicule and threat. And, he sought to act in sync with the ideas he professed. I admire Luther for these things…for his willingness to live based upon his understanding of what was right.

I don't know if 500 years is a magic number for religious reformation. But, I do agree that we are in need of a significant change in religious life. Some would say that religion is simply dying. God no longer makes sense in a scientific world. Others hang on to faith in God, but transform God into a symbol of ultimate meaning, of the energy permeating the cosmos, or of an ethical ideal of the good. And still others continue to find meaning in an understanding of God or the divine that emerges from ancient texts and traditions.

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500 years after Luther posted his 95 Theses, the issues up for debate in the public square are much different. Our society has been changed not only by the printing press, but by a digital communications revolution that places the world at our fingertips whenever we go online. We cannot escape diversity of thought, culture, or identity. And yet, for too long religious identity has been a way to belong to a particular group, a specific sect, a certain way of thinking and being. In practice if not in professed doctrine, religion has functioned to divide us into groups of us and them, of the like-minded and same-looking. What then is the role of religion in a world where difference is inescapably present in our day-to-day lives?

At its best, religion calls us beyond ourselves, beyond our need to simply survive. In the middle of the night when we're wondering if we have enough within to keep struggling with the grief, the hopelessness, or the anger, religious language and practices can help sustain us, reminding us of a larger purpose, a bigger hope. They point us to meditation or prayer, to stories of strength and endurance, to experiences of community and care. They do not hesitate to face the raw truth of injustice, pain, and even death. But they also remind us of the wonder of life, the possibilities of renewal, the importance of doing what is right.

Religious life still matters in 2017 because our lives as humans will always be more than the animal need to survive. We have inner lives of reflection; emotional lives of joy and heartbreak; spiritual lives that seek purpose and principle. We struggle with how to live well, how to live right, how to live with a sense of peace. We need to engage these parts of our lives. Yet, too often we can fill our lives with the demands and distractions of modern life without giving space to what's happening within.

What's happening for you within? I know some of you are carrying very difficult personal burdens. And, with all that is within, you show up here for a moment of respite, for the support of friends, or for the experience of sitting with others and not feeling so alone.

For others, our personal life may be fine, but we feel a deep sense of fear, anger, or even despair by the state of things in our nation. From the effects of climate change that go dangerously unacknowledged, to the intentional disarray of the health insurance market, to the many immigrants facing deportation, people's lives and wellbeing are threatened.

The word on my mind all week has been "enough." There is too much at stake for too many lives to be silent. I am haunted by the story of a monk in a backwater town who took action where he was and started a conversation. His conscience compelled him to speak up against practices he found abusive and wrong—even when those in power could crush him,

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even when change seemed improbable. I want to move within this stream of action Luther began. I want to say enough to the lies, to the dehumanization of those different from us, to the hatred that can blind *all* of us to the pain and suffering of others.

Alone, no one of us can transform the world. But, together I wonder what we can do. At its best, religious community is the place where we can show up to have these conversations about our hopes and our despair, our anger and our plan for action. It is a place where we show up to hold each other when our hearts are grieved and where we show up to offer a generous smile of delight to celebrate the birth of a new child. Religious community is where we show up so we are not alone as we struggle and question.

On this 500th anniversary of a man, a monk, and his questions, I hope we find in Luther's story the courage to speak up about the issues that unsettle us today. I hope we can be bold in speaking truth to power and committed to building religious communities of care and support for the work. *The* Reformation may have begun 500 years ago, but our work continues here and now.

So may it be.
Amen.

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