

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“After 500 Years, is the Reformation Over?”

October 22, 2017 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

Meditation

Behold, Blessed One, I am weak in faith; strengthen me.

My heart longs to be filled with love;
Warm me and make me fervent so
my love may go out to my neighbor.

There are times when I do not have a strong and firm faith;
There are times when I doubt and am unable to trust.
There are times when I am poor
and you offer mercy from your abundance,
for you came to be merciful to the poor.

I appeal for help.

In thee I have sealed the treasures of all I have.

Strengthen my faith and trust in thee.

Again and again I miss the mark;
while Thou art upright and holy.

In thee is the fullness of the righteousness I seek.

In gratitude I will remain faithfully with thee
the One from whom I gracefully receive
and to whom there is nothing I need give.

My heartfelt response to such generosity
is the abundance of my love freely given.

Readings

These are Biblical passages that moved, influenced and inspired Luther:

Psalm 22:1-5

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

³Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Romans 1:16-17; 15:1-4

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." ...

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Luther comments:

"You have the Apostle Paul who shows to you a garden, or paradise, which is full of comfort, when he says: 'Whatever was written, was written for our instruction, so that through patience and the consolation of the Scriptures we might have hope' (Rom. 15:4). Here he attributes to Holy Scripture the function of comforting. Who may dare to seek or ask for comfort anywhere else?"

"It is thus very true that we shall find consolation only through the Scriptures, which in the days of evil call us to the contemplation of our blessings, either present or to come."

"Therefore, whenever any one is assailed by temptation of any sort whatever, the very best that he can do in the case is either to read something in the Holy Scriptures, or think about the Word of God, and apply it to his heart."

Sermon

The beginning words from Psalm 22 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" are reported to be Jesus' words of anguish on the cross. Martin Luther also deeply feared he had been forsaken by God. He left his university studies to become a monk. He struggled mightily to be pleasing to God, fearing he might be damned to hell. The mighty saving God felt remote and far away from him. He longed for an assurance that he was acceptable and loved by God.

In our day and age, death doesn't feel like a close companion, a ghostly figure haunting our doorways. But the memories of the Bubonic plagues that decimated Europe were fresh in the minds of people in those days. Whole families, whole villages were wiped out without warning, without explanation. An angry God had raked up the people, even the good and holy ones, into a leaf pile of death. "What would make one acceptable to God *if even* the righteous were taken?" I can imagine tormenting Luther.

The Catholic, the universal church, the bulwark against evil and the capriciousness of fate, hadn't saved the righteous. Luther visited Rome as a delegate and was disgusted by ostentatious displays, by nepotism and corruption. He saw the palatial buildings and cathedrals built with money from the poor, fearing for their immortal souls.

The great consolation of losing one's loved ones was, and remains for many of the faithful today, the hope of reunion with them in heaven. Yet who is pure and without sin? The Church and the sacrifice of the Christ were supposed to be the means to that end. The Church created a way, by offering a payment, called an indulgence, to compensate for any unforgiven sins so that person could gain the peace of mind they sought. Yet would such a scheme work?

Luther was a man of his times. Influenced by the Renaissance Humanism of his day, he trusted in the power of reason. His doctorate in Theology at the University of Erfurt studying the Bible in Greek and Hebrew opened up gaps between what the Bible said and the teaching and practice of the Church. This was especially true of the practices of selling indulgences. He found no rationale in scripture for the practice. The practice also offended his understanding of the nature of God. He didn't find reasonable evidence in the texts you could buy God's favor with human currency. In fact, he questioned our ability to influence God at all with our actions. He declared his grievances 500 years ago on October 31 nailing them to the door of the Wittenberg Church, the official start of the Reformation.

The gap between what Luther read in the Bible and Church belief and practice was a crisis of authority. Before this, the use of argument and reason served the purpose of transmitting the teaching of the church. If people questioned the Church doctrine, they were heretics and usually put to death. Luther was indeed declared a heretic four years later by the Pope and banished at the Diet of Worms. But with the obvious corruption, confidence in the church lagged. And there was a window for a new source of authority to be declared by Luther, the Bible.

With the advent of the printing press, and vernacular translations, people could begin to study it for themselves. Not everyone, of course, since most people still couldn't read or afford books. But people could choose which scholarly interpretation was correct by hearing them debate with each other. The best reasoned interpretation should win the day. In seeking the truth, they thought scholarly reason trumped ecclesiastical authority in belief and practice.

Implicit in trusting reason is trusting the ability of the individual human mind to better access truth than hierarchical religious authority. Renaissance Humanism followed by the Copernican revolution and the Age of Enlightenment step by step dethroned the Church and elevated the rational individual as the arbiter of truth.

I don't have time this morning to map out the complete development process from Luther to the present. I hope I've said enough about that process to suggest that Luther and Solo Scriptorium, only scripture as our guide, were critical to the development both of individualism and the non-dogmatic approach to religion of Unitarian Universalism. The liberal secular democracies of today depend on entrusting individuals with this ability to discern truth rationally, select leaders wisely, and participate in self-government. Not that we trust any one individual to do this – that would be the process of papacy and monarchy. The collective will of the people will be the wisest path, each making their rational choice. Not only have we entrusted our access to truth and good governance

to the individual, we have also organized our land use, workplace and economy around the individual as a rational economic unit.

So where are we today, 500 years later? Unfortunately we are in serious trouble.

Where belief in the sanctity of the individual has gotten us seriously in trouble is with the environment. Billions of individual choices to have children, to mine the earth, to fertilize and irrigate the soil, to grow crops to raise domestic animals for food, to cut down trees, to burn fossil fuels, to put tens of thousands of new chemicals into the air, water and soil, to genetically engineer new and potentially threatening life forms, to driving species to extinction, are threatening the future of our planet to sustain life.

The increase in population along with greenhouse gases threatens tremendous dislocation of people as sea level rise and climate change make densely populated coastal regions uninhabitable. We are already beginning to see mass migrations of people unlike any we've seen before. The rise of nativism, and anti-immigration sentiment here and around the world can be linked to the first wave of climate change refugees.

The basis for this exploitation of the earth is the economic system promoted by the West that enthrones individual consumption and property use. Our individual choices drive the market that drives the businesses that seek to provide us with what we want. If we like avocados and almonds, California farmers plant orchards. If we like to eat grapes and drink wine, Napa Valley and the Finger Lakes become covered with vineyards. If we like to drive cars, sheiks drill oil wells in the desert and wars are fought in Iraq and Kuwait. If we like ivory, elephants and rhinos are threatened. The love of pigeon meat drove the passenger pigeon to extinction.

If Luther were to come back to celebrate his 500th anniversary, I suspect he would be amazed by the problems we are facing. I wonder if he would retain his faith that the Bible would have the answers to our questions through his reliance on scripture alone.

We Unitarian Universalists have left the authority of scripture behind long ago. We are facing problems of a scale that couldn't have been conceived or even discussed in Biblical times. They had no clue how to manage the resources of the planet, the germ theory of disease, or the management of technology. Yes, we can and do find metaphorical inspiration in Bible stories, but sometimes that takes a lot of interpretation.

What would Jesus have to say about neutron bombs and tactical nuclear war or managing climate change? How about women's reproductive rights? What about waterboarding or cyber-warfare? How would Jesus respond to meeting an Indian Swami or a Buddhist monk or a South American shaman? Would Jesus approve of interfaith efforts or would he encourage people to follow his Father only?

With the rise of the "nones," fewer and fewer people are looking to traditional Christian religion for their answers. They may read the Bible but they are unlikely to read *only* the Bible. They may also read Greek philosophers. They may read the Existentialists, the Romantics, the Dhammapada and the Bhagavad Gita. They might read Shakespeare and Khalil Gibran and the Varieties of Religious Experience by William James. The modern person with access to Google will range over the canon of human thought with just one search request.

The problem for us 500 years after Luther is not access to scripture so we can find out for ourselves. Our problem is having too much information and knowledge intermixed with opinion and deception. Add highly technical knowledge and analysis and we have less and less ability to assemble all the facts and figure everything out for ourselves. We are more and more dependent on what Google decides to show us, thus more and more vulnerable to manipulation.

Luther's answer was faith in God and faith in God's grace. There wasn't anything we could do to earn God's salvation as it was a freely given gift to us through Christ's sacrifice for us. Jesus had done the work, we need only receive the result.

Whether we believe this or not, it will not guide us in reasonably responding to the challenges of our times that require action or require refraining from action. Believing we are saved through Grace may give us confidence to act rather than stay frozen in indecision. It might also lead us to make deluded choices.

One of the best gifts Luther gave us by questioning Papal authority was to question having any absolute source of authority at all, be it the pope or revelation or reason or science or personal experience. Uncertainty is a great gift and source of humility for a species prone to self-importance.

Luther was wise to break down a system that entrusts authority to one person or one institution. Replacing one person with one book doesn't work either. Not in a world tightly knit together by electronic communication, air travel and international trade. The dominance of one culture or one religion over another is not going to work as a way to build world community.

The reformation of today is the work of building an egalitarian world community. The foundation for that work is universal human rights. No matter where you live or what culture you come from, every individual has undeniable rights that must be respected. Slavery, gender oppression, racism and ableism must be overcome and abolished in the world to come.

The religious traditions that will survive and thrive in the future need to be able to honor their different paths and different understandings, even their sense of uniqueness, while at the same time appreciating other traditions unlike their own. Christians must hold the paradox of their unique saving message through Jesus the Christ while recognizing the legitimacy of other major world religious traditions, and even being willing to learn from them. One can advocate for one's religious approach without diminishing another's approach.

This is the core of the Unitarian Universalist approach to religious truth and meaning. We are practicing within our walls the very approach we advocate for the world that we reason will create world community. It has parallels with our vision of how people of different colors and cultures can live together too.

More than mutual toleration, when we practice this in a way that leads to mutual appreciation and acceptance, we will be building together a kind of respectful community that broadens and enriches while at the same time deepens our appreciation for our own gifts, traditions and witness.

And, in the process of this work, we will be transformed into more whole, complete and healthy human beings. We will continue to grow and develop when we are in contact with the best every culture and every great religious tradition has to offer. And the wider we are the wiser we will be.

The more we recognize the other in ourselves, the greater will be our love and compassion for each other.

So this is the 21st Century faith I see evolving out of the Reformation. May the process of reforming continue to shape us as we continue to grow and develop as a faith and as a species for the benefit of all life on this planet ... including humanity.

Benediction

Luther held that there was no spiritually significant distinction between the laity and the clergy. He used the term, the “priesthood of all believers.” He thought I, as a minister, have no spiritual advantage over any of you. That takes any burden of seeking truth *for you* off my shoulders and *returns it* to yours. I’ll do the best I can to seek it, but the decision is ultimately up to you. This is a radical trust and responsibility for each person to carry.

While we all have this responsibility individually,
we *need not* carry that burden *alone*.

May we share together that responsibility and
help each other find our way.