

Sunday, October 31, 2021
Reformation Sunday
Pastor Tim Huber

A WORD to Live By!

Welcome to you on this Reformation Sunday! But before we go back 504 years to Martin Luther nailing those 95 theses to be read on the church door of the castle church in Wittenberg Germany; I thought we'd first go back to home, 160 years ago when the first pony express letter was red in Sacramento after a 2000 mile journey from Missouri. To make that happen more safely and efficiently Pony Express riders had to weigh no more than 125 pounds; most were around 100, use smaller uncomfortable saddles, ride a horse shod with lightweight shoes or maybe none at all, at full gallop for ten-mile increments. And then also they weren't allowed to carry but the most meager of provisions including letters in the mail only written on onionskin sheets. This was of course through really, hostile territory as well. And yet for all of that concern for their safety, especially by weight conservation; every single one of these riders was still required to carry one full sized Bible with them. Why? Because the owners of the Pony Express viewed the word of God as absolutely essential for these riders for their journey on the trail.

My question here this morning is how much do you value the Word of God during your journey here on this earth? Does it weigh you down or actually lighten the load? Well obviously, Luther was willing to risk his life for the message of God's grace that he found in God's Word. In spite of all of Luther's many accomplishments, listen though to what he said near the end of his incredible life. "I opposed indulgences and all the papists but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote Gods Word. Otherwise, I did nothing. And while I slept and drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Phillip and Amstar, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever afflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing the Word did everything."

This reformation Sunday we are not here really to concelebrate Luther, but rather, the Word of the gospel that Luther taught. Because like those Pony Express riders, that Word of grace that he discovered in scripture and carried with him everywhere that he preached, this was essential for his journey in life on earth. But just how do you and I honor the Word of God? Well, let me suggest four ways this morning. I call them the four T's. We treasure it, we traverse it, we trust it, and we tell it.

First, we must learn to treasure God's word as a gift to us. You know before Gutenberg's press came along and made God's word available to the masses; handwritten, beautifully illustrated bibles literally were worth a treasure, and certainly not available to the masses. Most of whom course couldn't read them anyway. But that's not the treasure that I speak of here. I'm referring to the treasure that Luther found inside the Bible; and especially when he opened it up to Romans chapter 1, verse 17; that basically changed Luther's life forever. Where Saint Paul writes these words: For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed; a righteousness that is by faith from first to last just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith. Now Luther said, and I quote him. "This text was to me the true gate of paradise.

The Church of Luther's time and pretty much lost sight of God's grace and instead substituted a man-made definition of righteousness that demanded that we work out our own way to heaven by being good enough. But just how good, is good enough? Luther, the Augustinian monk, tried as hard as any man could ever have tried to earn that level of man-made righteousness. With his very painful acts of penance and yet he never achieved it. Because well, good enough, in God's language means perfectly sinless and holy. So, Luther learned to treasure the Bible so highly because it was the one and only place that revealed the true way to get right with God. That was simply by trusting in God's grace, through faith in Christ, who became our righteousness for us, by living the perfect life when he couldn't; and then dying on the cross the death that we should have died for our sins. From the day that Luther discovered that treasure, the Reformation was born and his dedication to God's word became absolutely relentless. The challenge now for us is to treasure Gods Word that highly as well.

But if we truly treasure God's Word and secondly, we also need to traverse it each day. Now when you traverse something, you keep going back and forth over something very thoroughly. Many of us have done that with holy scripture on a regular basis, many of us haven't yet had the pleasure or have just postponed it for a while, for other things. You know the great church historian Phillip Schaff once wrote, every true progress in church history is conditioned by a new and deeper study of the scriptures. And yet you know I just read a British survey about people who download E books. It found that anywhere from 23% to 44% of them, never actually either begin or finish reading the books they download. I wonder how that statistic speaks to the proverbial dusty Bible sitting on the shelf of many of us believers.

Luther lived in a time of biblical ignorance, and the Roman church certainly didn't help the situation and so he did something about it. Incredible scholar that he was he translated the Bible into the language of the people, in this case German,

the truly holy language, unless you're a Norwegian. And with little help from the Gutenberg Press, God's inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word, no longer had to be filtered to the people through a pablum of man-made rules ideas and opinions. It became now readily accessible to the people.

Luther's also had a secondary effect. Even among all the great ancient civilizations, there was never more than perhaps 10% of the people, who ever were literate. But thanks to Luther, a movement toward mass literacy began in the 16th century, with the belief that every person should be able to read and interpret the Bible for oneself. And this belief rapidly diffused across all the continent of Europe. Christian parents were spurred on them to educate their children, so that they too could know the way to eternal life, Christian education. Sadly, I think that we've now devolved back into a biblically illiterate world, that doesn't even have the slightest idea of who Jesus really is, or what a Bible looks like, or how a person gets to heaven; or even if there is a heaven. As believers we can't allow ourselves to devolve. It's time to fortify our spiritual diet.

The prophet Jeremiah said in here Jeremiah 15, verse 16: "Your words were found, and I devoured them. Your words are my joy and my heart's delight. Because I am called by your name, Oh Lord God of Hosts. Back in the 1500's, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, I'm sure had this verse in mind when he wrote that famous church collect that we always pray around Advent. "Blessed Lord who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning; grant us that we in such wise hear them, read mark, learn and inwardly digest them. That by patience and comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; that you have given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

So as a nourishing repast, may I suggest a healthy helping of pastor Duerr's excellent walk through the Bible study, at 6:30 PM this evening via zoom. My advertisement, oh and feel free to come back each week for seconds. He'd like that.

But in addition to treasuring and regularly traversing God's Word; thirdly we who walk in the shadow of the Reformation, also need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us totally to trust God's Word. After all, it is the Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible in the first place. The apostle Peter writes in second Peter chapter one. We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you all the power in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; but rather we were eyewitnesses of His Majesty. Above all you must understand that no prophecy of scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. The prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Notice, it doesn't say that God's word contains some truth but rather that all of God's Word is truth. When John says in John 17:17, "sanctify them by the truth, Your Word is truth." By the

way, did you know that the seminaries of the Lutheran Church Missouri Senate are among the very few remaining Lutheran seminaries in the world that still stands with reformers like Martin Luther in declaring that the Bible is God's word rather than merely contains God's Word.

Today, especially among the caustic cancel culture terrorism, we frequently hear themselves using the term 'my truth' to defend their radical ideas. Which of course, to me it brings us back to the days of the book of judges when we're told "and everyone did what they thought was right in their own eyes." So, that worked out really well for them, didn't it? The term 'my truth' is simply a synonym for my arrogant ego. It has very little to do with reality or divine truth that cannot err, and that never lies, or makes mistakes. Psalm 119, verse 138 says: "God your statutes that you have laid down are righteous and they are fully trustworthy." Why, because they are truthful, that's why! After all, either God only speaks the truth, or He isn't a truly holy God.

Don't get me wrong here, if we look at scripture, is not unusual even for pastors like myself to often struggle with certain parts of holy scripture and then eventually, humbly have to admit that God's ways are higher than my finite minded ways. And when I do, I eventually realized the problem wasn't that the Bible contradicts itself, but rather that it contradicts me. Even Luther himself, the great reformer, theologian, professor, translator, prodigious author, polemicist, musician, hymn writer, and yes pastor; often wrestled many times with God's Word. Remember how he referred to the book of James as the straw epistle and he refused to recognize it even recognize it as canonical because of James' emphasis on the importance of our works verifying our true faith. Understandably, that did not at the time sit well with him, when on the one hand Luther was reading St Paul's very clear words about salvation by grace alone, through faith in Christ Jesus; while at the same time Luther was always battling a Catholic culture of salvation by works. However, some years later, a little light bulb seemed to click inside his head and Luther had much kinder words to say about James' epistle. The goal for us is never to be afraid to dive into God's Word every day. Even when we do have to wrestle with it as it challenges us to stretch beyond our own finite presuppositions.

Not only do we need to treasure, traverse, and trust God's inspired inerrant, infallible Word; but with the Great Commission in mind, we also need to tell God's word to others. Think of it this way. Every time believers read or study God's Word, they should be asking themselves, OK how can I now tell this to other people as well? I doubt if many people have ever read what Luther once wrote, just a little treaty entitled: "What to look for and expect in the gospel." And in it, he claims that the gospel is primarily and always was meant to be a spoken word. That's where the power is. And that, "We only have the written word because we might forget the

spoken word.” So the written word, is written down for us. For all of Martin Luther’s other voluminous number of writings; he was saying that the gospel primarily is a living word intended to be told to others something that he certainly put into action his own life and ministry.

This kind of just blows my mind right here but get this; between 1510 and 1546 Martin Luther preached 7000 sermons. I bet not one of them was only 20 minutes long either. That is like one sermon every two days for 36 years. 2300 of them do still survive. Luther loved to talk about “the God who speaks.” Just as God spoke all of creation into being, just by saying, “let there be.” So also, He speaks into us a renewed relationship with Himself. By putting our old sinful nature to death and raising up a new living nature through the power of the spoken word in our Baptism.

Just as Luther would always go back to the creating, powerful, words of Genesis, he also points us to the words of John chapter one in our gospel lesson for this morning. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Bible is the living Word, because in it, Jesus the Incarnate Word, Himself, the Word made flesh comes to us with His grace, love, and the light of salvation. Telling others about that living Word isn’t something that we are meant to keep to ourselves. Sharing his word about the free gifts of grace, life, joy, peace, and forgiveness with others come right along with having the Word, Incarnate dwelling within our heart.

But the Word of the gospel is never limited and then never meant to be limited to the apostles, or to pastors, for the foreign missionaries. Or the formal sermons like this either. Telling God's Word of grace to others can be done in very subtle ways. How about one word of encouragement you might include in that brief text message to a friend who's been despondent? Think of what word of comfort God might give you to share with your neighbor who just lost a loved one. Think about word of apology you might extend to somebody that you harmed. These also tell others of God's love of grace and that He freely extended it to us on the cross.

Do you know what the most repeated question by Jesus during His ministry was? Have you read? Now it is really, have you never read? Underneath that simple question is a life altering assumption the Christ followers read and know God's Word. That's why Jesus said, “man shall not live on bread alone but on every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Jesus, that Word Incarnate, Himself, knows that there is a hunger deep inside every human heart that can never be satisfied by just nibbling on human opinions. But only by consuming a full course of God’s Word every day.

So, my fellow believers, the call of the Reformation is for each of us to give ourselves totally to the Word of God. Are you willing to do that? Preaching the Word never cost Luther his life directly, although it certainly took a toll on his health. Yet there were many others who did lay down their lives just for the sake of God's Word. Some years after Luther nailed the 95 pieces on that door, two young Augustinian monks who had had heard that truth of salvation through Christ alone; were so move by this that they went into Brussels to proclaim the gospel good news. They were immediately arrested by agents of the anti-reformation government. They were questioned by university professors. They were told to recant and abandon the idea of salvation through grace alone. They were then imprisoned and interrogated repeatedly. But they refused to abandon the truth of God's Word. And so, on July 1st, 1523, Johann Hesh and Heinrich Vos were burned alive at the stake for the sake of God's Word. They knew from the beginning that this would be their fate. They also knew that the message of God's grace alone, through faith in Christ Jesus, still was sweeter than even life itself. And that is why we need the Word of God to be the first, the last, and the loudest voice in our ears. Not just on this Reformation Sunday, but until we hear the voice of Jesus calling us home.

May God grant that, in our Savior's name, Amen