

7.6.25 Sermon Transcript – Martin Luther

I don't know if any of you saw this, but back in March, Paula White Cain, who is actually the head of the White House Faith Office, was advertising the selling of blessings. She said that for giving \$1,000 to the ministries that she oversees that “God will give you seven supernatural blessings. God will assign an angel to you. He'll be an enemy of your enemies. He'll give you prosperity. He'll take sickness away from you. He will give you long life. He'll bring increase in inheritance, and he'll give you a special year of blessing.” That is verbatim what she said. She denied that this was transactional, and again, I'm quoting, said, “You're not doing this to get something, but you're doing it to honor God, realizing what you can receive for your special Passover offering of \$1,000 or more as the Holy Spirit leads you.” Now, when I first saw that, I thought, “Oh, dear Lord, I hope that that is satire.” I really wanted it to be. I wanted it to be an article from The Onion or something like that, but this was, in fact, real.

As I was thinking about this week's sermon, and the person that we're looking at this week is Martin Luther, I couldn't help but see some parallels between what was just offered by Paula White Cain and by what was being offered in the church that Martin Luther was critiquing – the selling of indulgences. So for those of you who may not know, Martin Luther is seen as the spearhead figure of the Protestant Reformation, which took place in the 1500s in continental Europe. During that time the church had been consolidating power, and there had been growing practices of corruption, and the selling of indulgences was one of those practices. People were essentially told, “You can buy an indulgence and that would go ahead and forgive you for sin that you haven't even yet committed yet.” There was it was this transactional idea of the forgiveness of sin – you could even purchase salvation for deceased relatives. It's mind-boggling, much like for me, seeing Paula White Cane's advertisement was mind-boggling. But Martin Luther was this spearhead figure of this movement to critique the practices of corruption that had taken root, to critique the ways in which power had been so consolidated within the church at that day and time.

Luther saw the selling of indulgences as this spiritual scam that exploited the poor. and distorted the message of grace. Johann Tetzel was one of the main people that Martin Luther was opposing. So Tetzel's slogan, and you might have heard this before, was this: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” This is what Martin Luther was critiquing and challenging. Of course, it was not the sale of indulgences alone, but you may have heard about the fateful day in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed these 95 theses to the doors of Wittenberg Cathedral, spelling out all of these critiques that he had of the church as it was existing and operating. Martin Luther has become this almost larger than life figure in history. Thus far, I'm pretty sure he's the most famous person that we've talked about in this Holy Disruptor series, because he's so well known, not just within the church, but within history itself, since the Protestant Reformation was such a pivotal moment in Western history.

Martin Luther was one who stood with courage in the face of intense institutional pressure. He was a teacher. He was a religious person. He cared very deeply about Christianity and the well-being of Christians. And for him one of the main things that he really pushed for and emphasized in his critique of the church was that the church should be an institution of grace that proclaims the truth; that it's not anything that we do to save ourselves. It's not something we can purchase or earn our way toward. Rather, salvation is by grace alone. We are justified by faith and the faithfulness of Jesus alone. He believed the church was obscuring the gospel in this way.

But it wasn't just a theological critique. He also critiqued the way in which the church had centralized power. He saw how the church had become more and more concerned with power, and with wealth, and with control than following the ways of Christ. He believed the authority of the Pope had grown to become unchecked and that Scripture was often subordinated to either human tradition or to the structures that continue to uphold these systems of power. Luther, in this critique of the church, he acted to decentralize religious power, believing that no human being, not even the Pope, could stand above the word of God. He had a real concern for the lay people, the common folk of the church. He saw people living in fear, ordinary people living in fear. They were afraid of purgatory or hell, they were unsure about salvation, and they were completely dependent upon the hierarchy of the church and on rituals to have any sense of salvation. Why? Because all of the teaching, all of the authority, all of the power rested in the hands of the priests and the greater hierarchy. Remember, at this time the Bible was not written in the common languages of the people. Most people could not access it, and so the only ways in which they were able to learn about God was through the power structures of the church. We from history, over and over and over again, what happens when only a small few hold the power to determine and to articulate their version of the truth.

And so on October 31st in 1517, that's when Luther put those 95 theses on the doors of the church in Wittenberg, he criticized the sale of indulgences, and he called for theological debate on repentance and on forgiveness, and he argued that salvation is by faith alone. Luther was excommunicated for his act, and then in 1521 he was brought before Diet of Worms where he was told, "Recant from all of this that you have been doing," and Luther said, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason, I cannot and will not recant anything. For to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me." He acted because he believed he was first and foremost, accountable to God, not to institutions, not to tradition, not to fear. When he refused to recant at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he was rejecting the idea that truth could be controlled by a centralized institution, and he was refusing to let fear win.

Luther's courage wasn't just about defiance in the face of an institution. It was about this idea of decentralization and the idea that God's truth actually belongs to all people, not just a spiritual elite who were calling the shots. He says, grace, salvation, those are free gifts of God alone and no human being gets to determine who is worthy of those gifts or of who gets those gifts, of who is in and who is out.

Now one of the things that I find pretty interesting about Martin Luther, and I've only more recently learned about this as I've been spending more time with Luther clergy since Darick is serving a Lutheran congregation part-time. You know, we as Methodists, we don't really study Martin Luther in seminary, and so I did not know too terribly much about the Lutheran church, but one of the things that they have that came from Martin Luther is something called the Small Catechism. Now, the Small Catechism, it's essentially a book written in the form of question and short answer. This is something that Martin Luther created because he wanted to put the power to learn and to study in the hands of families, in the hands of lay people. He didn't want people to have to rely upon a hierarchy in order to learn and to have access to Scripture and theology. He created this as a resource to be used within homes, in the common tongue, that parents could use to sit down with their children, that congregations could use, that lay people could use with one another. He trusted that ordinary people could, in fact, encounter the sacred. He believed the Spirit could speak through a mother to her children and children to a mother. One way in which he challenged power structures was to help find a way to let go of that control because he believed God could show up everywhere. God could show up in the midst of a household, in the midst of a community. I feel like his creation of the Small Catechism highlights one of the really great things about Martin Luther.

Now, there are things that we can critique Martin Luther for. He was not a perfect guy, and he was still very much a product of his time. But he did seek to pull power away from the center and put it on the hands of people who had no power anymore. When it came to understanding the word and the work of God. When I look at Martin Luther and I think about his message and his work and things that we can take from him today, first and foremost, I think we can recognize that grace, salvation, faith – those are gifts that come wholly from God, and we as human beings don't get to determine who's in or who's out. We don't get to play gatekeeper, but rather God says “By grace alone, by my grace alone, by my gift freely given.” And we know that God gives to all. Martin Luther teaches us courage in a number of ways and it might not mean standing directly before the Pope and refusing to recant, or directly before the emperor and saying, “I’m sticking it to you.” It may not look like that. It could, but it doesn't have to. It could look like challenging unjust religious systems that exclude and silence. It could look like us, as faithful Christians, standing up where we see abuse taking place within the church itself and saying, “Let's look back to this Scripture, this gift from God, to see what Jesus has to say.” It can look like refusing to practice those kinds of things or those kinds of traditions that may have existed that have harmed others. It might look like openly and willingly repenting and repairing those bridges that have been burned down. It can look like refusing to let spiritual authority be abused. So again, that's calling out abuse where we see it, where we see harm. I think it can also look something like this. Just as Martin Luther recognized that the deep truths of faith in Jesus Christ can be known and experienced amongst all people, and he wrote that Small Catechism for families and for children, I think part of having courage is to trust our children with deep spiritual questions, with not feeling like we have to give them concrete answers on every single thing, but to say it's okay to ask questions. It's okay not to understand. It's trusting our kids and one another with deep questions instead of easy answers.

Martin Luther was willing to let go of some of the power, and even the sense of peace false peace can come with this idea, “Well I’m certain I know the answers. I know what I believe.” That’s a really tempting thing at times because it’s so much easier when things feel more clear-cut, but part of what Martin Luther allowed for was this recognition that there has to be some more room for questions and for searching together and not just taking what is given to us from whomever. I think it also looks like teaching and preaching and living a gospel that lifts up the lowly instead of propping up systems of power. I mean, that’s how the Protestant Reformation began.

I do want to say, in case you don’t realize, the Protestant Reformation did then actually also spur the Catholic Church on to have its own Counter-Reformation, where they heard many of the critiques that Martin Luther had and recognized, “Huh, maybe we need to make some adjustments ourselves after all.” Martin Luther’s courage in the face of intense institutional pressure then did actually also cause that institution to more fully look at itself. Luther’s story reminds us that Reformation does not happen without resistance, and resistance isn’t faithful unless it brings the Word closer to the people, to all of us. I think one of the most faithful things that we can do right now is to search Scripture together, to know the Word that God gives to us. Now, when I say Word, I can mean two things. When I say word with a capital W, I mean Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God. But we do also talk about Scripture, which mediates Christ for us, which helps us to see and to understand more fully who Jesus is.

Martin Luther teaches us courage in the face of institutional pressure, but Martin Luther teaches us that a significant place that comes from is being a people who draw closer to the words and to the ways of Jesus. It’s probably more important than ever that we know the story of Scripture, that we know the work of God through God’s people. It’s important that we don’t just know little snippets here and there and we can “jerk-a-verse” out to justify whatever we want. It’s important that we know the overarching trajectory of the work that God is doing. This is what we are called to. May we be brave like Martin Luther. May we help to decentralize power and like Martin Luther. But even more, may we imitate Jesus in those ways that Martin Luther sought to imitate and encourage. May we never ever forget that the word of God is alive, not just in institutions, but in the hands and in the hearts of the people that is us, the people that is the Body of Christ. May we, in the words of Martin Luther, say together, “Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me.” Amen.