

"SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO STAND UP AND BE COUNTED!"

Text: "Chose this day whom you will serve." -- Joshua 24:15

Rev. Richard M. Cromie, Ph.D., D.D.
Sharon Presbyterian Church
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Many years ago I was up in Quebec City, Canada to preach at the historic St. Andrews Church, the oldest Presbyterian Church in North America. On the way in from the Airport, I was driven by an Augustinian Monastery where a huge bronze statue of St. Augustine and Martin Luther stood out on the front lawn. It sounds nice and ecumenical, the one a Catholic Saint; the other the Founder of Protestantism. But I need to tell you that poor Martin Luther was down on his back, grimacing with excruciating pain. The Saintly foot of a smiling Augustine was tramping on his throat. What was worse: some Canadian Catholic had taken a baseball bat and struck his own blow against Luther, for his head had been nearly severed from his body, and no one had taken the trouble to repair it. I decided that day that one day I would preach a sermon in defense of Martin Luther.

I chose today because the last Sunday of October has traditionally been Reformation Day in the Protestant Churches, in honor of that late October morning when Fr. Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses (Objections to the then prevailing Roman Catholic procedures) to the front door of the Church in Wittenberg. The Reformation began that day. Nowadays almost nobody preaches on the occasion; I guess for fear that somebody down the street might be offended.

Acceptance of others, no matter who they are or what they believe, has become our modus operandi. It sounds so nice: "Be nice." "Treat all men and women as brothers and sisters." But in my opinion we have gone far too far. Confucius said, "Keep your mind so open, but don't let your brains fall out." Our brains, such as we have left, are spilled all over the ground. Tolerance has become our final test of truth; but, I remind you - tolerance is a luxury when things begin to matter; and they matter now, a lot.

Our forebears were accused of being heavy handed, biased and judgmental. Perhaps they were; but they knew what they believed and why and were not afraid to say it. They actually believed that Jesus Christ died on the cross to save us from our sins. And they told everyone, no matter what their neighbors thought. Meanwhile, we have diluted and watered down the Gospel. "We are all trying to get to the same place," we say; but it is not true. If everybody has an ultimate right to their own opinion, then everybody is right, and nobody is wrong, and truth does not matter anymore. If anybody can believe anything, and do whatever they choose, so long as it doesn't hurt anybody else, then everything goes. But that's Balderdash! Nonsense! Horse feathers! It is time to bring Martin Luther back.

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Let me briefly refresh your memory on the first Reformer. Martin was born on November 10, 1483, in the small town of Eiseleben in Saxony, North Germany, the town where by the way, he preached his last sermons and also

died there. He spent most of his life in Wittenberg, where his father owned several mines and made a comfortable life for his wife and eight children. Martin went to the finest schools. His mother was gifted in music and imagination. His father was self-confident and courageous. Luther inherited the best from both: he was sensitive and musical; but he was also determined.

He enrolled in Erfurt University, and studied pre-law. His father was pleased to have a budding young lawyer in the house. But, abruptly one day however he broke his father's heart. On July 16, 1505, Martin took the vows of poverty and chastity and entered an Augustinian monastery. No one seems to know exactly why. His best friend had recently died, an event which always touches a young person's life. Psychologists speculate that he was separating himself from his father to become his own person, whatever that means. Even in childhood he had an intense and persistent interest in religion. Eric Fromm once wrote a psychoanalysis of Luther which dwelt on the whys and wherefores of his conversion, if you are interested in that kind of thing. No one knows for sure why people reverse course, but they do.

As Martin told the story, he was walking home on July 2, 1505, when a horrible bolt of lightning struck nearby. It terrified him; he thought he was going to die. In that moment he prayed, "St. Anne, if you rescue me I promise to enter the monastery." He was as good as his word and he kept his promise. Many don't! Like Bob Hope once quipped over the loud speaker when the Airplane landed following an awfully bumpy and scary ride: "Now

that we are down safely, you all can take up the sins you promised to give up when we were up in the stormy skies.”

Luther became an outstanding monk, but he still was not at peace within himself. He felt unworthy, and that he could never do enough to please God. One day in reading the Bible he landed on the sentence, “The just shall live by faith.” - A quotation in Romans (1:17) from the prophecy of Habakkuk, who declared that "The righteous shall live by his faith." (Habakkuk 2:4) It gave him the peace he had been looking for. Those words became the watchword of the Reformation and they still drive us on today. Luther said: “I passed through the wide-open doors into Paradise. I came to know that I could not earn the mercy of God. The Almighty gave it to me as a free gift.”

It was a startling revelation, new and alien in a Church which at the time threatened its members that they had to please their Priest or they would go to hell. The ordained leaders interpreted the presence and preferences of the Lord. The Medieval Church had become a pay-as-you-go system of faith. Grace and forgiveness were for sale. Members clamored for the published list of how much it cost to be forgiven of this sin and that. Confession was a sacrament, but to receive the forgiving Grace of God, you had to pay up at the door.

To sweeten the collection baskets, you could also buy "indulgences," as they were called, to secure the salvation of your friends and family who were already dead. No matter what they had done in life, they could receive God's

favor in retrospect, for a price. It became so commercial that "traveling salesmen" went from city to city selling indulgences. When Father John Tetzel came to Wittenberg to sell some forgiveness chits, Luther was incensed and criticized him to his face.

Shortly thereafter, on October 31, 1517, Luther took a list 95 theses, articles of debate, and nailed them to the church door in Wittenberg. He offered to debate with anyone, anywhere, anytime, about what Christ required of His people according to the Scriptures. By the way, he was not the only one to object, far from it. Most people knew what was going on. They routinely snickered behind the backs of the Clergy, but they were afraid to criticize the Church in public.

No one agreed to debate Luther; so he sent a copy of the complaints off to Rome. At the time, Pope Leo X was building the marvelous and massive St. Peter's Cathedral, and he needed the income from indulgences to help pay for the project. He ordered the Augustinians to discipline Luther and shut him up. But Martin was undeterred. He went up to Heidelberg to defend his claims. He continued writing and preaching on the weaknesses of the church. His list grew. Naturally his problems with the official Church also grew.

On June 15, 1520, The Pope brought the matter to a climax. A Papal Bull of Excommunication was issued to include the burning of all of Martin Luther's books and treatises; and, if he refused to recant, he was to be burned at the stake himself. Like some Muslim Clerics do now with those who disagree,

Rome ordered a universal warrant for his death. Anyone could murder him on sight and receive the blessing of the Lord.

The Emperor Charles, however, realizing that Luther's popularity was growing in ecclesiastical and political arenas, decided not to move vigorously against him. Rather he invited Martin to an official Church Council Meeting, which turned out to be the infamous Diet of Worms. The books and pamphlets Luther had written were placed on the table. "Are these yours?" they asked him. He said his name was on them, "Of course, Yes." He was asked to recant what he had written.

Luther was shocked. He thought he had been called there to discuss the merits of the issues. He finally answered: (Are you listening?) "I am bound by the Scriptures," he said, "and by my conscience, I cannot and will not retract anything." Then he added the crowning touch which echoes through the centuries, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." Historian Roland Bainton wrote that the birthday of the modern world was October 31, 1517, the day Luther said, "Here I Stand."

He would have been a goner, but God had another story to tell. The Elector Frederick of Saxony, who thought it was ridiculous to send money from the German people to Rome anyway, whisked Luther away to his fortified castle at Wartburg. There Luther disguised himself; he grew a beard and dressed in the clothing of a Knight. He would sneak down to the neighborhood pubs to have a drink with the boys. No one knew who he was or, at least, no one

told. While he hid in the Castle of Wartburg, Luther worked hard. He translated the New Testament from Greek into German, a translation still used to this day. He prepared his works for publication. He got involved in advocating for the poor and the needy.

He had long felt that clergy should be free to marry, and he wrote a Biblical defense up there about it. Sometime later he met Catherine von Bora, a former nun, and married her. He explained that he married her for three reasons. One, "To please my father, who wants grandchildren." Two, "To insult the Pope." Three, "To spite the devil." Notice it does not say that he was in love with Catherine, but he was, as much as a former Monk could be.

You can imagine what the people said around Wittenberg: "Aha! Now we know why he left the monastery. He had a girlfriend all the time!" That and worse. But Luther was undeterred. Catherine became a good wife. She bore him six children, although not all survived. When lovely little Magdalene died at age 13, Luther wrote that he could never have believed how deeply a father could hurt inside when he loses a child. Much like Abraham Lincoln was when little "Willie" died while he President, Luther was inconsolable. He believed that the child was in heaven but it did not seem to help his grief. It was at that dismal period in his life, by the way, when he wrote the hymn we will sing to close this service, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," (Ein Feste Burg). The stress of his life took its toll, as it always does. When he was sixty-two years old, some severe health problems took over. He died at several months later in 1546.

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I could tell you much more, but let me gather up a few sermonic thoughts before we go.

I.

First, Martin Luther discovered that no matter how much success, knowledge or money a person has, it does not help inside. Luther's search was a search for inner peace, as it is with all of us. Unless and until you find that, nothing else matters much.

Most of the people you meet look for the purpose of life in some kind of accomplishment: a good job, a fine home, a nice vacation, success, praise and honor. Those are not bad. "But someday" Kipling wrote, "you will meet one who cares for none of these things. You will see the richness in that person and you will know how poor you really are."

That peace comes from within. Grace is a gift of God. Some of the most unhappy and worried people I know are those who have the most things. Some of the happiest and most secure people I have known through the years, have had very little. Luther taught that Grace comes when the forgiving love of God work its way inside your soul. It echoes of the man in the New Testament parable who was looking for treasure out in the field one day. When he found it, he ran home and sold all that he had so he could

buy that precious pearl of great price. But that's the peculiar thing about this: you can't buy it, you can not buy God's Grace, you cannot earn it, and you cannot command it, because it is not for sale. It is a free gift from God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let me ask you, my friends in Christ here today: "Have you found it? Answer truthfully, not out loud to me, but whisper it to yourself. Do you have it? I mean that inner peace, so that whatever happens in the world with devils filled, and when life threatens to undo you, you can stand secure in the knowledge that Christ loves you, and that you belong to him. Inner peace is a gift from God. Grace is a gift. You are worthy in God's sight, not because you are worth it, but because you are His. We were bought with a price, Paul writes, but the price has been paid in full already. The righteous shall live by their faith.

II.

The second thing I want you to remember from Luther is that once you accept God's gift of Grace and inner peace, you have to go out and share it with others, or you will lose it. Luther was confined for a time in a Tower, locked up in a Castle, lived in the monastery, scurried about to save his life on the run. But still, he never failed to spread the good news of Christ wherever he went. We can revel in our good fortune to be chosen of the Lord. But the gift of God is not given to revel in. The faith is meant to be passed along. You cannot earn God's grace, but you cannot continue to receive it if you do not reach out into the lives of others. We need to act on what we say

you believe. Faith without works is still dead.

Let me shift to a personal example and parallel: Twenty five years ago or so, my Doctor told me that if I did not lose some weight and get to exercising that I was going to shorten my career in ministry. (He did not say it that nicely, by the way.) Now it might be difficult for you to believe it now, but for several years I worked out almost daily and it showed some grand and wonderful improvement. I even got to the place where I could see my ribs again; I had forgotten what they looked like. Everybody told me how good I looked. But then, I don't know why I decided to stop the vigorous program. Now to be honest I didn't decide; I just drifted and let it slip away. What you see now in your 280 lb minister is the result. Oh dear.

The point is that we also have to keep at it in matters of our spiritual health and fitness. Just as surely as exercising the body improves us; so does our commitment to spiritual growth keep us alive in matters of the spirit.

Luther was committed to Church reform, but he also knew how essential it was to go beyond Church-work. We can overdo the Churchly things. We can get overburdened by the details of what it takes to make our own congregation go round. That is important, for sure, but meanwhile, where the world is going to pot, we need to shift our focus. Like Bishop Colin Morris once wrote out in Zambia: "As we were deliberating on some revisions to our Articles of Faith, a native African died of hunger on the doorsteps to our meeting place. It nearly broke my heart!" I have known a ton of

Christian people whose faith stops at the door of the Church.

III.

Third and last, in the title of our sermon I end with a question from Martin Luther: "What are you standing for today? On what issue do you stomp down your foot and say: 'Here I stand, I can do no other'?" There are great causes going on in the world today, good and worthy issues which need the help of good, devoted Christians. Pick one of the causes, any one: your deal. Some require hard work and endless energy. Some are less rambunctious. They all require prayer and they all need financial support. You must stand for something or you will fall for anything that comes along.

What is your point of no return? Where do you stand? Pick your own battleground. It might be in the area of human rights: abortion, women, minorities, children, education, local schools, the environment. It could be war and peace, conservation, sex education, immigration, poverty, the homeless, hunger. It could be family life and the strengthening of marriage and the home. It could be a concern against crime, gangs, Aids and other diseases, Cancer, abuse of women and children. It could be any good cause. There are a fistful and more. Pick one, any one. But for God's sake, for the sake of all the rest of us, and for your own sake, don't let it be no cause at all. What are you standing for?

If you get too rowdy about it, as Luther did, they will criticize you. No doubt.

People do not like to be told they are wrong. Remember how rowdy they became with Jesus. People do not like change; they prefer to stay the way they are. If you were brought before a tribunal, would there be enough evidence to convict you; could you prove that you are a follower of Jesus Christ, and by the way you live, show that you stand for something greater than your own life and loveliness. "Here I stand." I know Christ saved your soul; but what you are doing with your body here on earth is of equal concern.

For some of you, in the older age brackets perhaps, or for reasons of health, it might mean that all you can do is write letters and contribute money and call attention to the cause. With some, shut in or in nursing homes and Assisted Living, it might mean that all you/they can do is pray for the cause. But since when do we believe that there is no power for change in prayer?

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Which brings us down to Joshua in our Biblical text, and what the successor to Moses said to the people back then. Those were perilous times, back when the people of God were entering the Promised Land. Evil was everywhere, foreign causes were intent on their destruction. The Canaanites, Jebusites, Amorites . . . each had a special brand of religion. All offered individual short cuts to a happy life and a quick and easy ticket to eternity. It was an enormous burden on the people of God who were trying to claim the land which God had promised. Alien forces and strange people had taken it over.

Joshua, the successor to Moses, addressed his people: "Every day of your life you will have a choice to make," he bellowed, "between the best that you can be and the ordinary person you will become if you do not stand up for what you believe. You can rise up and fight or you can bask in the warm sunlight of an easy faith. You can cut corners and compromise; or you can stand up and be counted."

Then he ended: "Choose this day whom you will serve. Choose the foreign gods beyond the river, or choose the God of your fathers and mothers. But, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. (Joshua 24)

I have a friend in Florida who had a plaque made for the front door of his house, for all who enter to see. It reads: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. We all need a couple of those now: one for the doorway of the house; one to place over our hearts, for now and forevermore. Amen.