

Today, we begin a four week series celebrating the 500th anniversary of a movement in Christianity that completely changed the understanding of our faith.

We Episcopalians are a result of the movement.

No major change in a faith comes about over night or in a instance.

The 500th year is marked by one event which occurred on October 31, 1517.

An obscure Augustinian monk professor posted a notice to debate some questions that had been troubling him. Martin Luther posted his notice on the church at Wittenberg in Saxony, one of the fiefdoms of Germany.

This is seen as the beginning of the Reformation.

All changes in the way a religion operates or in its beliefs are attempts to return the faith to purity.

What Martin Luther was trying to do was to rid the Catholic Church of some ideas that he felt were compromising the faith.

During these four weeks we'll talk a lot about history, and I hope to make some of the ideas, which still prevail in our faith, real to you and me.

Some of the ideas are so much a part of the way we think and act that we don't even realize that at one time they were radically new.

The reformation was not one event or one sided movement, it came about slowly and had many different dimensions.

Most historians narrow the movement to four reformations, but there were more.

The four are the Lutheran Reformation in Germany, the Reformed Reformation under Zwingli in Switzerland, The English Reformation and the Presbyterian Reformation under Calvin, also in Switzerland.

These Reformations all had geo-political and sociological dimensions.

Depending on whether you are a religious historian or a political scientist or a sociologist,

you will see the Reformations through different eyes.

Even to narrow the timeline to the 16th Century isn't very accurate.

But the Reformations all have at their root the desire

to correct the church,

to make it be the church God wanted it to be.

The religious origins of the Reformation could be seen

as beginning in the 14th century.

The church began to demand that its priests be celibate

and called for absolute obedience to the pope.

The popes were seen to be feudal lords and created a method

of levying taxes on dioceses and parishes.

Bishops and priests discovered they could buy their positions

and that positions could be very lucrative.

Many priests saw themselves as lords of their parishes and,

mirroring the popes, took concubines

and lived in relative luxury.

Priests did not preach.

They only said Mass and administered the seven sacraments.

In reaction to the decline in respect for the church,

mystics wrote and taught a new way to engage with God.

Some of the mystics of the 14th century were Catherine of Sienna,

Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Thomas a Kempis.

In the midst of all the religious turmoil, the Black Death killed

a third of the European population.

It was seen by some as God's vengeance.

The English and French begin the "Hundred Year War."

Near the end Joan of Arc led the French forces.

In that century scholars began interpreting the New Testament.

John Hus in Bohemia and John Wycliffe in England

translated the Scriptures into the vernacular.

They saw in the New Testament a church that was very far

removed from the practices of their Roman Church.

Wycliffe, a professor, wrote that the Parliament

could limit the church's power.

The Dominican Savonarola in Florence preached
against the evil life of the pope.

All three died at the hands of the church.

The church suffered no challenges lightly.

The pope Boniface VIII tried to rule over
the kings of England and France unsuccessfully.

When he died a Frenchman, Clement V, was chosen as pope
and moved his court from Rome to Avignon
under French protection.

The English did not appreciate having to send money to the pope
in Avignon who was under the thumb of a French King.

Rebellious cardinals aided by the most revered person
in the church, Catherine of Sienna,
elected Gregory XII as pope and placed him in Rome.

The Kings of northern Italy, Germany, Scandinavia and England
followed pope Gregory.

The Kings of France, Spain, Scotland and southern Italy supported
the pope in Avignon.

Finally, the cardinals of the church deposed both popes
and elected another, resulting in three popes at one time.

They all excommunicated each other.

(I'm simplifying the story.)

Sociologically, another movement began.

We call it the Renaissance.

This was a major period of cultural reorientation.

People began to substitute modern secularism
and an individualistic view of life
in place of the teachings of the church.

This was the time of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Colet,
Erasmus and Machiavelli.

England, France and Spain emerged as true nation-states.

In the 15th century, things began to unravel more.

Columbus found the Spice Islands he thought,

but instead it was the islands of the Caribbean.

Magellan sailed around the earth.

Copernicus said the earth circled the sun not the opposite.

St. Peter's Basilica construction began and indulgences are sold in Germany to fund the construction.

They are sold to people by the idea that they will move loved ones from Purgatory to Heaven faster.

“As soon as a coin the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs.”

And then came that pesky Augustinian monk and his 95 Theses which challenged the sale of indulgences as not Scriptural.

The 95 Theses were simply a call to debate some issues which were troubling Martin Luther, but

in them he challenged the authority of the pope.

Martin Luther, Zwingli, Thomas Cramer and John Calvin

in their own way upset the apple cart.

O yes, then there was the invention of the printing press and movable type in 1434.

No longer was a scribe necessary to hand write multiple copies of a text of any kind.

In a day, a press could produce thousands of copies of a letter.

And they did.

So what does all this mean to us.

Well, the Reformation movement created

a whole list of things we take for granted, for example,

- Mass (word and sacrament) in the vernacular
- Communion in both kinds (bread and wine)
- Centrality of scripture
- Emphasis on congregational singing
- Two sacraments (baptism and eucharist)
- Removal of sacrificial language in the canon of the Mass (what we call the eucharistic prayer)
- Texts in the hands of worshipers (advent of the printing press)
- Emphasis on preaching (law and gospel)
- The presence of Christ in the eucharist described as real presence, “in, with, and under,” rather than either transubstantiation or mere symbolic presence

- Worship as nourishment for laity living their baptismal vocation in the world

Throughout these four weeks [at the 10 o'clock]
we will be singing hymns that are rooted
in the Lutheran Reformation.

We started today with the signature hymn by Martin Luther.

Read carefully the lyrics of the hymn.

It speaks clearly of the changes Luther felt lead
by the Holy Sprit to create.

Our recessional hymn today is one of the iconic hymns of the Lutherans.
You'll see the same themes that run through both hymns.

Preached by The Rev Perry W. Polk
Grace Episcopal Church, Fairfield, CA
October 8, 2017

Sources:

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