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**Romans 12:1-4, 9-15**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2017, at the 8:30 a.m. service at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect....*

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*

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Five hundred years ago this coming Tuesday, Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic monk, nailed “Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church, which at that time had only been open for eight years. His theses – or statements – were arguments against what he considered to be the corrupt sale of indulgences by the Catholic Church.

He posted them in Latin because he intended to start an academic debate; however, they were soon translated into German and because of the recently-invented printing press, copies quickly spread from Germany throughout Western Europe and ignited the Reformation.<sup>1</sup>

When I teach new member classes at Westminster, I often say that Luther never intended to start a Reformation or to break with the Roman Catholic Church, but that his action set off a series of political, economic, and social forces that were waiting to be unleashed. The result was something similar to what happened in America in the 1960s: a lot of pent-up change affecting all sectors of society coming virtually at once. I then add that we Presbyterians enter the Reformation through John Calvin, a French lawyer and layperson, who twenty years after Luther published the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which sought to give intellectual order to the explosion Luther unleashed. Calvin’s sense of order has stayed with us Presbyterians ever since, leading to our sometimes self-deprecating title, “God’s frozen chosen.”

Like many Protestant congregations around the world, we at Westminster are acknowledging the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation today: with a service and sermon built around this history at 8:30, and with a choral presentation at 11:00 of the Bach cantata based on the best known Reformation hymn – “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” whose words were written by Luther.

In this sermon, I want to share with you what the Reformation has come to mean to me, a Presbyterian pastor in the twenty-first century. I hope what you glean from this sermon will help you understand our church, our Reformed tradition, and most of all, where your own faith fits or lives in tension with our heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/germany/wittenberg-castle-church>.

Let us pray: *Come, Holy Spirit; Heavenly Dove; come kindle the flame of sacred love, in these cold hearts of ours. Amen.*

## I.

In Friday's *Wall Street Journal*, a historian named Joseph Loconte, who teaches at a small, evangelical college in New York City, summarizes Luther's impact. Loconte writes:

Born into a German peasant family in 1483, Luther came to *despise* every form of *spiritual elitism*. He sought to replace rigid church hierarchies with "the priesthood of all believers," the proposition that there are no *qualitative* differences between clergy and laity.

"...we are all priests of equal standing," Luther wrote.<sup>2</sup>

Luther clearly believed, as I do, that our wearing these robes, standing behind this pulpit, serving elements of bread and wine, do not lift Whitney or Patrick or Casey or me above any of you who attend *every* Sunday or who have come *this* Sunday. The "priesthood" consists of "all believers."

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This led Luther to a second affirmation: the doctrine of *Christian vocation*. According to Loconte, Luther "dignified *all* legitimate work." Luther wrote:

A shoemaker, a smith, a farmer, each has his manual occupation and work; and, yet, at the same time, all are *eligible* to act as priests and bishops.

I know in Washington we are often criticized for asking people we have just met: "What do you do? Where do you work?" If we ask that question because we do not know anything else to ask, our asking is *innocent*; if it is because we are trying – perhaps unconsciously – to determine if the person is worth any more of our time, the question is *pernicious*. But behind the question may lie an affirmation that work is a way we all serve God and express our faith; and thus, our interest in a person's vocation may be a genuine attempt to get to know them at a deep and fundamental level, perhaps even a level of common faith. "A shoemaker, a smith, a farmer...all are...priests and bishops."

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Loconte also points out that one of Luther's most "subversive" acts was to translate the New Testament into German, the language of the people. This effectively placed the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments into the hands of all Christians. Prior to that, the interpretation of the Bible had been limited to the official teachings of the church. But Luther wrote:

We must inquire about [scripture] of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace.<sup>3</sup>

According to Luther, the Bible belongs to the people, not to the church, the pope, the priest, or in our day, the minister, the teacher, the professor. The Bible is "the people's book."

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, "An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility," written in 1520.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "On Translation: An Open Letter," written in 1530.

And fourth, Loconte writes:

Luther always elevated the individual believer, armed with the Bible, above any earthly authority. This was the heart of his defiance at the Diet of Worms:

My conscience is captive to the Word of God [Luther said]. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God.

Loconte says:

Luther offered...a spiritual bill of rights. Generations of reformers—from John Locke to Martin Luther King Jr.—would praise his achievement. [Five hundred years] later, his message of freedom has not lost its power.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, then, the priesthood of all believers, the doctrine of Christian vocation, the Bible as the peoples' book, and the right of individual conscience are hallmarks of the Reformation. They are the spiritual air in which we "live and move and have our being." The 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation is worth celebrating.

## II.

I now want to share with you a way that the spiritual freedom found in our Reformation heritage has become crucial to my own faith, preaching and teaching.

I attended Union Seminary in New York in the 1970s. One of my teachers was Dr. Christopher Morse, who visited Westminster for an adult education dialogue shortly after he retired several years ago.

I took a seminar from Christopher on the early writings of Karl Barth, a twentieth century Swiss theologian who was influenced heavily by Luther, Calvin, and Kierkegaard. Among the books we read was Barth's commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans*.<sup>5</sup>

Reading Karl Barth is never a completed task, and for most it is wisely never a "begun" task. But for those who are able to stick with it, his ideas and images often have immediate impact (like poetry) and long term effect (like philosophy).

Handwritten notes I made on the pages of Barth's commentary reveal that during the course I read a passage whose impact on me at the time was not major. Yet sometime in the 1990s it became significant.

The Biblical verse about which Barth was writing was one Whitney read earlier:

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God....*

Barth entitled his comments on the passage "Positive Possibilities." They are found on page 451 of his commentary; hence the sermon title.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Loconte, "How Martin Luther Advanced Freedom," *The Wall Street Journal* 10/26/17.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the Sixth Edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), page 451.

I spent the better part of yesterday trying to re-phrase them for you, but realized my re-phrasing was longer than his original. So I am just going to read this one paragraph for you. I have enclosed a copy in your bulletins. I don't expect your necessarily to follow, so if you want to zone out, do. You will not be tested and I will not be offended. It will take about three minutes. Then we will get you back.

Here are Barth's words:

The phrase 'Positive Ethics' means that volition and action which constitute a negation of the *form of this world* (xii. 2), a behaviour which contradicts its erotic course, and protests against its great error.

Properly speaking, 'Positive Ethics' belong only to *the volition and action of God*. Absolute, positive, ethical, human volition and action which genuinely protest against it, lie beyond our knowledge.

We do, however, know a *relative* positive human behaviour which, although it belongs to the human possibilities of this world, and although it is marked – as, indeed, all human possibilities are marked – by the *form of this world*, nevertheless possesses, even in its *present* form, by virtue of the imperishable and primary constitution of the universe, *a parabolic capacity, a tendency towards protest, an inclination to enmity against EROS*.

*We must, however, be careful how we express this.*

We may find it easier to regard some kinds of human behaviour as being *more pregnant with parabolic significance* than others.

We may, for example, choose love rather than hatred.

*Certain particular human possibilities* may appear to be more closely related to the divine disturbance and transformation than others are.

It may seem to us more probable that we should attain to that 'sacrifice', that demonstration to the *honour of god* within the framework of a particular series of concrete actions: *more probable*, that is to say, that we should be able to fulfill the four commandments written on the first 'Table', *if* we do so having first fulfilled the commandments written on the second 'Table'.

But when we say 'easier', 'more closely', 'more probable', we mean that the ethical necessity even of these particular kinds of human conduct does not lie in their 'matter' – for materially they belong to *this world* – but in their 'form', that is to say, in their *Primal Origin*, the Oneness of the subject of the action.

The possibility that from time to time God *may* be honoured in concrete human behaviour which *contradicts* the commandments of the second Table must therefore be left *open*.

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In 2014, when Christopher Morse retired, I was asked to write an article for the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* about the impact his teaching had on me as one of his students who had become a pastor. I wrote about this passage and said the following:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Larry R. Hayward, "Tribute to Dr. Christopher L. Morse," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Volume 65, Nos. 1 & 2, March 2014, pages 17-25.

- Certainly, people in the parish, myself included, find relief in the idea that some of our “behaviours” might be more “parabolically” close to the will of God than others.
- As a pastor in a denomination in which understandings of sexual orientation, attitudes about marriage and divorce, and norms about sexual behavior and its relationship to marriage have been changing during my life time, the idea that one could be “honoring” God even if one violates or accepts violation of one of the commandments of “Second Table” is thought-provoking.
- In addition, as a pastor who has served a congregation in which many people work in the arenas of military service, defense, national security, and diplomacy, this possibility is hopeful and challenging.
- It opens the door to ethical decision-making that may initially contradict moral and religious absolutes yet ultimately prove to be responsible. This is life-giving to many, given the complex moral choices they face in specific situations with restraints concerning time and options.

### III.

If both Barth and Luther are correct, such spiritual freedom represents a tremendous investment on the part of God in each of us as an individual.

- But it is that freedom that makes me a Christian.
- It is that freedom that makes me a Protestant.
- It is that freedom that leads me – in my own ethical decision making – to rely on my faith, on prayer, on relationships with others in the Christian community, on the scriptures. and ultimately, on my own conscience in relationship with God.
- And it is that freedom that leads me to respect and praise so many of you who continue to ask what is the responsible thing that honors God in our world, in our nation, in our community, in our church, in our family, in our personal lives.

When I share in or witness those conversations among you,

- I know that I am in the midst of “the priesthood of all believers.”
- I know that I am among people who see their secular work as Christian vocation.
- I know that I am among people who value the scriptures and genuinely believe that God has placed them in our hands.
- And I know I am among people who will at times so know their own consciences that they will say: “Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God.”

So on this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation it is the spiritual freedom I experience and see in you for which I am grateful. Amen.