

## **STAND IN FAITH**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Oct. 22, 2017  
based on Mark 10:17-22; Philippians 3:7-8***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Here We Stand—Sure Faith in Uncertain Times.” Since this fall is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, this series has been an opportunity for us to journey through the key ideas of the Reformation as a way of reflecting about how we can stand in faith in the midst of today’s uncertain times.

We have noted in this series that the main ideas of the Reformation can all be summarized in short Latin phrases—phrases which the Reformers themselves used to express their key points. The phrase this morning is *incurvatus in se*, which means, “curved in on self.” That is a succinct description of our human problem, and it’s a pretty good definition of what sin is. We see it all the time—instead of directing their lives toward God, human beings turn in toward themselves and pursue their own self-centered agenda, creating very often a mess. A contemporary rendering of *incurvatus in se* would be, “It’s all about me.”

The Scriptures proclaim the answer to that human problem, such as when Jesus talked about denying yourself; and the Reformers lived out the answer in their lives, all of which we will be considering this morning as we look at something of the dramatic story of the Protestant Reformation. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, which was located in the German state of Sachsen, or Saxony as we call it. In remembrance of this date, the last Sunday in October is now celebrated in many Protestant churches as Reformation Sunday. In the United Methodist Church, we normally don’t give much attention to the Reformation Sunday idea, but since it’s the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, we are doing something special—next Sunday, at the 10:30 hour, our Sanctuary Choir will be presenting the cantata, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which will comprise about half the worship hour. The cantata is based on Luther’s most famous hymn, which became a kind of anthem of the Reformation.

The 95 theses that were critical in launching it all were 95 arguments that Luther had with the leadership of the Catholic church. Luther was a Catholic monk, so it was an insider’s objections. But as we know from some of the political squabbling going on these days, arguments among insiders can be quite heated. Things got very heated in the months following October of 1517.

The 95 theses were a series of propositions designed to launch debate, but many of them challenged what the pope was doing—they especially critiqued the pope’s effort to raise money for the building of St. Peter’s cathedral through the selling of indulgences, which essentially involved selling people tickets to heaven. We discussed that whole story

a few weeks ago. The pope did not take well to such criticism; in January of 1521, after Luther refused to withdraw his critique, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther from the church.

Shortly thereafter, in April of 1521, Luther was summoned to a meeting which has a very strange looking name in English. He was summoned to what looks like a “diet of worms.” Well, it would end up being worse than that. The meeting is actually pronounced Diet (dee-ET) of Worms (vorms). The word Diet comes from the Latin, *Dieta Imperii*, which means imperial assembly. This was a meeting of what the Germans called the Reichstag—or imperial assembly—of the Holy Roman Empire; it was being held at the German city of Worms, where you can still visit the cathedral where this all took place.

The Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages was a loose confederation of mostly German states. The head of it was Emperor Charles V, who needed political support from the pope. The pope put great pressure on Charles to arrest Luther; and so Charles called this assembly, and sent for Luther under the direction of the pope’s representatives.

Luther went to Worms, believing he must stand up for his beliefs. He expected that the assembly would be an occasion to debate his ideas. But when he got there, he found himself hauled before the assembly, where they had stacked up all 25 of his books and treatises on a table; and they asked him two questions. “Did you write these?” and “Will you recant them?”

Some years before, Jan Hus, an earlier Reformer and forerunner of Luther, had refused to recant when he was under similar pressure. He was burned at the stake. So were quite a few others who had defied the authority of Rome. If Luther had lived by the principle of “It’s all about me,” he surely would have acted at this moment to save his skin. But his response was remarkable. He said, “I cannot and will not recant anything. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.”

Luther was condemned. But he was fortunate to have friends through whom God was at work, particularly his own ruler, Frederick the Wise of Saxony. Frederick had helped Charles get elected as emperor in the first place; so he had influence, and Frederick had insisted before this all started that Charles must guarantee Luther safe passage back out of Worms. Of course, Jan Hus had also been guaranteed safe passage by the rulers in his day, and we know how that ended up. But Charles, who agreed to safe passage, actually held to his word and let Luther head back towards Wittenberg. At the same time, Charles was inclined to give loyalty to the pope; and he finally issued an edict, *The Edict of Worms*, which declared Luther a heretic, called for the burning of his books, and called for Luther’s arrest, which, if carried out, would likely have led finally to Luther’s execution.

Luther faced real peril. But as he journeyed back toward Wittenberg, Frederick the Wise intervened; he sent troops to whisk Luther away to his castle at Wartburg, where Luther would spend the next several months in protection. We will continue the story next week, when the theme will be, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

What gave Luther the conviction and the courage to take a stand for what he knew was right and true when doing so brought him into enormous peril? The answer to that can be found by looking at the Scriptures we considered this morning.

In the gospel reading, we heard about a man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus began with where he knew the man was. He talked about following God's commandments. The man was in fact following God's commandments. But as important as it is to live a good life, the man sensed that this was not enough. Luther had had a similar experience. As a Catholic monk, he diligently followed all the rules of the Catholic church. By any measure, he was living a very upright life. But he knew that he still fell short; he knew that this was not enough. At this juncture, both Luther and the man in the gospel story shared a key insight—*decent living is not enough* in order to truly be right with God.

That is a much needed insight for our time. There are a great many people in our day who want to think that the Christian life is one where you are a decent person who is nice to others and does not do anything terribly wrong. But Jesus clearly invites us to something far more. In the gospel story, he says to the man, "Here is what you lack . . ." He was talking to a man who was not only an upright citizen but who was rich, but according to Jesus, this man was spiritually lacking. "Here is what you lack," Jesus says. "Go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and then come, follow me." (Mark 10:21)

Clearly, Jesus calls not just for decency but discipleship. He calls for a devotion to God that is far more than just being nice and saying we believe in God. Jesus calls us to a commitment so genuine that we actually put our money where we claim our heart is, and genuinely follow Christ in our life. But precisely this the man could not do. Our passage concluded, "The man was shocked and went away sorrowful, for he had many possessions." (Mark 10:22) He was in the grip of *incurvatus in se*—his heart was turned in on all his stuff and his worldly security, and he could not bring himself to follow Jesus, especially if it meant real self-giving.

Martin Luther faced the same sort of challenge that this man faced when he heard the call of Christ to take a bold stand against the abuses of the medieval Catholic church. Luther as a monk had little wealth, so he did not have much to lose in terms of possessions; but as a member of the Augustinian order Luther did have, at least potentially, a peaceful and secure life. He would lose all that for sure if he answered the call of Jesus. But he responded to Jesus' call and took a dangerous stand for God's truth.

Luther would never have suggested that he was somehow more courageous or more righteous than the man in the Scripture story who had failed to follow Jesus. Luther was just as much in the grip of *incurvatus in se*—just as drawn toward his own self-interest as anyone else. But he found the answer in Christ; it was through the grace of Christ that he was freed from the grip of self-centeredness and moved to center his life instead upon

God and God's purpose. Through Christ Luther was enabled finally to do the opposite of what the man in the Scripture story did.

You can see in that Scripture story how Jesus would draw us into two key spiritual movements. Jesus was drawing the man, first of all, away from his attachment to his possessions toward the higher values of God's kingdom. But the man resisted that call and remained stuck on his things. In contrast, Luther responded to Jesus' call and let Christ open his eyes to recognize what is of true value. So he came to the insight of the apostle Paul, who said, "Whatever I gains had, I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ." (Philippians 3:8-9) Along with Paul, Luther came to perceive the surpassing value of joining ourselves with Christ and sharing in God's purposes. This is the essence of *self-denial* in the New Testament—turning from self to gain Christ.

Having recognized the value of connecting ourselves with Christ, the next step then is to actually join ourselves to Christ in faith; as Jesus said to the man in the gospel story (and to all his disciples), "Come, follow me." (Mark 10:21) Luther took that step of faith, and it was this personal connection with Christ that finally gave Luther the courage and the conviction to take the bold stand that he did, and to persist in his faithful witness for years afterwards. It was through his connection with Christ that Luther, in the end, was enabled to change the world.

Today people will occasionally be inspired to take a stand for one cause or another. But such commitments are often shallow and fickle. People get distracted by other activities, or discouraged by difficulties, or lured by other opportunities. A central reason for such wavering commitments is that people today often feel no real connection with God. People may believe in God; but when God is imagined as being far removed from daily life, it is easy for people to slack off in their commitments and their values.

A guy once stopped at a vegetable stand where there was no one present, just a sleeping German shepherd. He stepped past the dog, picked up a few items . . . then looked at the cash box, where there was a clearly printed sign—The dog can count.

It makes a difference if we think that someone is watching. The behavior of many people today indicates that they don't really think that God is even watching them, because if they did, they would act differently, and they would give differently, and they would set their priorities differently. Of course, God is watching; as the Scripture says, "Your deeds are in full view of the Lord; God sees all your ways." (Proverbs 5:21)

If we are misbehaving, the sense that someone is watching can of course get us to straighten up, at least temporarily; but that won't go very far. Jesus invites us to something much more—a positive, life-giving relationship with God. Our passage says that "Jesus, looking at the man, loved him," and finally said, "Come, follow me." Jesus is inviting

us to join in a spiritual fellowship with Him, so that the love of Christ will inspire and guide and empower us. This is what Luther did as he opened himself to Christ in faith. In the process he found that he was no longer just turned in on self, but his heart became turned toward God. He was enabled then by Christ to stand for God's truth and to make a huge impact for good, and he did all that not out of a sense of compulsion but in a spirit of real conviction and joy.

Today our world is desperately in need of people who do not simply have some vague beliefs and some personal decency, but who are willing to genuinely give of themselves and take a stand for what is right. Along with Luther, we can be people for whom it is not all about me but all about Christ, and how we can join in the mission of Christ. We can stand in faith today—when we open ourselves to the grace of Christ and answer his call as he says to us right now, “Come, follow me.”