



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“The Treasure of the Gospel”

Scripture Lessons: *Psalm 130: 2 Timothy 3:14-17*

This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, October 30, 2022 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

This is one of those days on the church calendar, that, when it rolls around each year, pastors are left scratching their heads a little bit in terms of how to faithfully deal with what amounts to 2 rather significant dates on the Christian calendar.

Of course, if we were to ask any school-aged child about what is significant about these few days, they would likely tell us about Halloween – which is also one of my personal favorites, because it means that the candy bowl in my office will be full for at least a couple of days!

Today however, is important to the Church for a different reason, for today we celebrate Reformation Sunday. This is why we chose to sing as our Processional hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, which was written by none other than that great reformer, Martin Luther.

Now, we should all know that we are here this morning because of the gracious and sovereign provision of God, but we are also here because we are a particular expression of Christ’s Church that has come to be known as “Reformed” and “Presbyterian.”

...And to say that, is to affirm that we were uniquely birthed from a set of theological principles / a reformed theology which emerged particularly in the 16th century, and which was espoused by people like Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Knox...and so many others.

It happens that we celebrate Reformation Sunday at this same time every year -- on the last Sunday of the last full week of October, but there’s another significant day coming up on Tuesday -- All Saint’s Day!

As pastors we strive to neglect neither one of these important days, and seeing as next Sunday is Scottish Heritage Sunday – our annual “Kirkin’ O’ the Tartan” service – it’s not like we can easily put off one of these days until next week...

And so we are left to deal with them somewhat together. This morning we do this by way of placing both Reformation Sunday and All Saint’s Day, first within the context of what the Scriptures have to say about them, but also within the context of the life’s story of the man we know as Martin Luther.

Martin Luther was born the son of Hans and Margarete Luther in the year of our Lord 1483. Hans, was the son of a farmer and Margarete was a hard-working homemaker.

To ensure a better life for their children, Han’s determined to advance himself as a copper

minor, and to improve his job prospects he moved the family from the German town of Eiselben to Mansfeld.

And that proved to be a wise and good decision because the family grew not only numerically, but it also grew in terms of being well-respected and well-to-do.

To say that Hans and Margarete were harsh disciplinarians would be an understatement, and partly what drove them to rule over Martin Luther and his siblings with such an iron fist is that they aspired for so much for their children, and they knew that their son Luther had what it took to rise in rank and station...to climb that social ladder...and so they pushed him.

Eventually they insisted that he become a student of the law, and as a dutiful son, he obeyed their wishes and went on to attend one of the finest schools around in nearby Erfurt.

But something rather dramatic happened to Luther when he was 22 years old. He had just received his master's degree and had come home to visit his family...and he was on his way back to the university when he had what we can rightly call a lightning bolt experience.

It was a terrible thunderstorm – so fierce it was that Luther presumed God was going to take him right then and there. He was frantic and scared and came to a large rock to which he held on to for dear life...

And from that spot he called out: "Help me, Saint Anne, and I will become a monk." This was before Martin Luther had learned that he didn't need to pray to the saints, but he prayed to St. Anne nonetheless...

The reason he did so is because Saint Anne was known as the patron saint of minors / minors as a profession -- and Luther would have known that! Remember, his father, Hans, was a copper minor.

In fact, there could very well have been a little shrine in his childhood home that his father would have honored, if not venerated. It wouldn't be surprising to learn that Martin Luther – that he too may have stopped off at that little altar in order to pray before he left the house to return to Erfurt.

As fate would have it, the storm subsided, and the Luther perceived that God had done His part; and so, it was now time for him to fulfill his end of the bargain. Much to his parent's dismay, Luther left his promising law career and began his service to God as a monk.

It was during his spiritual journey as a monk that the promises of God in his life came to fruition. Luther continued to grow in faith -- had his own kind of spiritual awakening -- and as he continued to put his extraordinary God-given mind to work, his gifts as a Bible scholar and theologian, they began to flourish.

Yet as his faith grew...his heart began to break, because he could see that the church of his day had made the devotions of the human heart its greatest treasure –

Indulgences / a little forgiveness here / some time off from purgatory there / various interpretations and subsequent declarations birthed not out of the Bible, but contrived out of our very human sense of justification...that there was some practice, some initiative, something we could do to make ourselves righteous.

This is why theology matters so much / this is why it remains so important for us today to understand that everything the church says and does needs to begin not from our experience / not from what we want the Scriptures to say...but that who we are – our faith and our practice – that it would emerge from what the Bible actually says.

Scriptural divergences troubled Luther to the point that he could not keep it in any longer. For a long time, he had been a thorn in the flesh of the religious status quo, but now he was compelled to take a bold new step, a profound step to help the church reform her ways / to help

her rediscover certain basic Biblical truths.

It happened that Luther's community church, All Saint's Church – also known as the Castle Church – it was preparing for All Saint's Day on Thursday, November 1st, 1517.

And we need to know that the way they celebrated All Saints Day back then was different from how we might celebrate it today.

Today we know what Luther came to know, which is that the saints of God were people like him / people like you and me.

Like the sweet hymn puts it: "You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in the church, or in trains or in shops, or at tea; for the saints of God are just folk like me...." Faithful followers of Jesus, they are / the latest links in what amounts to a long and venerable chain of witnesses.

The Apostle Paul would also have us to know that the church is not only what we see, but it is also what we cannot see. He would have us to know that our membership transcends space and time.

In Ephesians 2:19 Paul informs us that we are "no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19), and when Paul uses the word "you" in that verse, it is plural, which means that our membership is transcendent – it goes far beyond the walls of First (Scots)....

I experienced a humbling reminder of this reality at a wedding over the weekend...it was the wedding of a friend and colleague, Anthony Thompson – Anthony serves as the Pastor over at The Holy Trinity Reformed Episcopal Church.

You may know that Anthony's first wife Myra was one of the people shot and killed at the Emanuel AME Church a little over 7 years ago.

I remember an occasion when a group of us were in a back church office space preparing for one of our Lenten services -- it was a couple of years ago now -- and Anthony took a call...and as he hung up the phone, he referred to the person on the other end of line as "Sweetie."

"Sweetie," we said. "Anthony, do you have something to tell us?" Turns out Anthony had met a lovely woman named Darlene and they were dating.

Anthony and Darlene were married on Friday afternoon, and as they had their first dance, I'll have you know that it was a wave of sadness that first came over me.

I remember wondering how his children were taking all of this in...I remember thinking to myself that if it hadn't been for that murderer Dylan Roof none of us would have been there that day!

But then I thought about something else / I thought about the communion of saints – I really did...that's a pastor for you – and I began to cry

Martha Ann saw me out of the corner of her eye, and she wondered what was wrong...and she started to cry.

...I'll tell you what got to me. What got to me was the fact that those who have lived this life of faith now live eternally with God / that they are not dead, but alive!

And as I watched Anthony and Darlene dance, I found myself imagining what Myra would have thought about that dance...

What would have been her perspective from that heavenly vantage point of hers? And it dawned on me...that she would have been smiling / that she would have delighted in knowing that Anthony's heart was now full again...full of love and devotion.

And lest we presume that such a recognition of what is happening on this side of heaven does not exist for those whose eternal life has already begun, let us recall again the

Transfiguration!

Moses and Elijah were there talking with Jesus...they weren't brought back from the dead / they were alive, and they were a part of God's ongoing story of salvation!

Or consider the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus...we see in that story that the Rich Man is not dead in eternity, he also was very much alive; and, what's more, the Rich Man was cognizant of what was happening on earth. He couldn't do anything about it, but he knew what was going on.

Which brings to mind another aspect of the difference between how All Saint's Day would have been celebrated in the late Middle Ages verses how it might be celebrated among Reformed Christians today...

And it has to do with the misunderstanding that those who have gone before us yesterday can actually do something for us today.

Martin Luther, in his own life, came to know this fundamental principle well. For example, it's one thing to give God thanks for His saints, and to learn from God's saints, but there is but one true mediator that we have been given, and that is Jesus Christ our Lord...the one who rules over earth and heaven!

Oh, but there was much more about to happen on that All Saint's Day back in 1517...history tells us that on that day -- Thursday, November 1, to be precise -- scholars tell us that there would be on display at the Castle Church a massive assortment of newly acquired relics, some estimates put the number of relics at 17,000.

Maybe someone wanted to see a thumb of St. Anne, or some straw from Jesus' manger, or maybe a twig from the burning bush. Perhaps someone had their heart set on that piece of the bread which Christ ate with his disciples during the Last Supper, or a piece of the sponge with which the Lord was given vinegar.

People would be able to see those kinds of relics and others -- and they would bow and genuflect -- and they would make purchases that would cut off hundreds of years off purgatory, and they would pray to the saints...and in these ways and others, the people would be led to mistakenly believe that their prayers and purchases and prestige were somehow the work of God.

It's no wonder that on that All Hollow's Eve, on Wednesday, October 31 to be precise (the night whose derivative we know today as Halloween) -- that night before the big day -- oh, it is no wonder that this Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, was so spiritually vexed, that he took that occasion to alert his community to the sins of the world / even the sins of the church.

And so, it happened that on the night before All Saint's Day Martin Luther nailed his list of grievances to the doors of the church / it was a list of 95 theses for debate.

One of the 95 statements read like this: **"The Church's true treasure is the gospel of Jesus Christ."** Friends, that remains the heart of who we are as Christ's Church today!

And such is the message for the church in any age...that if ever she loses sight of the light of the gospel, and fixes her eyes upon layer and layer of tradition / whenever she becomes attune to unsound doctrine / whenever itching ears accumulate devotions to suit the desires of the human heart rather than the heart of God...

Oh, in all such times and places, and in every good way, may she remember and celebrate the life's witness of Martin Luther and so many other saints of God / men and women of faith...ah, may she forever know and believe and affirm that not just chiefly, but that only through the Scriptures -- through the very treasure of the gospel of Jesus -- has God revealed to us that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone...in Christ alone!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.