

SERMON TEXT FOR SEPTEMBER 17, 2017 @ ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA  
MARTIN LUTHER: WASN'T HE THAT CIVIL RIGHTS GUY??  
#1 IN REFORMATION 500 SERMON SERIES  
TEXTS: Acts 9.1-22; Psalm 103.1-14; Luke 15.1-7

Cousin Bill was name William Penn Trout because of baby food!

I'm not sure why Martin Luther King, Jr. (or his father) was named as such, but Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr. clearly are not the same person.

Nine years before Columbus discovered America (1492), Martin Luther was born in the small town of Eisleben, Germany, and he was given the name of the saint on whose day he was baptized, Martin. His parents were poor, but they knew their son was bright, so they sent him to school. Luther attended the University of Erfurt, studying to become a lawyer (as was his father's desire). He graduated in 1505, but Luther was not really happy.

One day while walking home, a severe thunderstorm occurred. Luther was afraid. As the storm worsened, Luther began to pray to St. Anne: "If you save me from this storm, I will become a monk." The storm subsided, he was saved, and he kept his promise. (Now, this storm was not quite as dramatic as Paul's vision, which led to his conversion to Christianity, but it was life-changing nonetheless.)

In the monastery, Luther followed all the rules which were supposed to make his life as a monk more holy. He even tortured himself by sleeping on a hard floor and by beating his body. In 1507 he became a priest and celebrated his first Mass. But none of this gave Luther the peace of mind he was seeking. He was afraid of not going to heaven, and of God's wrath for his sinfulness.

The head of the monastery decided to send Martin to the University of Wittenberg to teach the Bible. Luther's study of God's Word as a professor at Wittenberg gradually led him to know the love of God in Christ. Through reading the scriptures - rather than listening to what the church had taught him - he finally found the peace he had been seeking.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther read about God's love for everyone and about how we are saved by grace and not by our good works. We don't have to earn God's love or God's forgiveness - they are a gift to all. Luther felt compelled to share this good news, and soon many people were clamoring to hear Luther teach and preach.

He traveled to Rome for a church conference, and was outraged at what he saw: other monks selling pieces of paper called indulgences. In essence, the church was selling "extra credits" to replace the punishment of people's sins and guarantee you a shorter stay in purgatory. Indulgences could even be purchased on behalf of those who had already died.

Luther realized that selling indulgences was wrong and that the church was just ripping people off! (Actually, they were trying to raise money for the building of St. Peter's Church in Rome.) He knew from the scriptures that God's grace couldn't be bought; God gives it to all for free. So, in objection to the sale of these indulgences and other abuses he saw in the church, Luther wrote 95 theses, and on October 31, 1517

Luther nailed these theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Luther's purpose in posting these statements was merely to challenge those in the university to debate over them. While initially written in Latin, Luther's 95 theses were quickly translated, printed (since the printing press had recently been invented by Gutenberg), and spread over much of Germany and other parts of Europe. Wherever they spread, they stirred up much excitement, because Luther was not the only one who disliked the sale of indulgences and disagreed with other practices of the Roman church.

As you can imagine, Luther's arguments greatly angered the pope and other church leaders. They felt that Luther needed to be quieted, so they decided to have him arrested. However, Luther's friends got wind of the plan and managed to hide him in the Prince's castle. There he continued to write many books to explain his ideas about God and God's love.

In 1521 Luther was ordered to appear before princes and magistrates. Despite his friends' protests, Luther traveled the 300 miles to the city of Worms. There, he was asked whether he was prepared to take back anything that he had written, but he refused to admit his teachings were wrong. Outraged, the emperor signed a law that made Martin Luther a heretic and an outlaw, and ordered everyone to burn his books and kill Luther if they found him.

Again, Luther hid out in Wartburg Castle, given shelter by his friend Prince Frederick. Life in the castle was lonely, but he made good use of his 10 months there by translating the Bible from Latin into German. Luther wanted the German people to be able to read the Bible for themselves - something that we, of course, take for granted. Eventually, Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic church. But his allies continued efforts to reform the Church.

The last 20 years of Luther's life were very busy. He taught regularly at the University of Wittenberg and preached in the Town Church. And he continued to write, eventually publishing almost 400 works, including Biblical commentaries, The Small and Large catechisms, sermons and tracts. He also wrote many hymns, including his most famous based on Psalm 46, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

Luther married a former nun, Katherine vonBora, and the Lord blessed them with six children, although they were constantly boarding and feeding many students. Luther died on February 18, 1546 in the town where he was born, Eisleben.

In his lifetime, Luther saw much abuse and many incorrect teachings and practices in the Roman church. As a priest, Luther tried to reform the Roman Catholic church and return it to its roots, the Gospel. Luther's intent was not to start a new church, but to reform the present one. Eventually, those who "protested" the teachings of the church came to be known as protesters or Protestants, and eventually, Lutherans, in honor of their leader, Martin Luther - which Luther did not agree with. Still, the name stuck, and today we proudly bear the name Lutheran.

So, back to the original question: Wasn't Martin Luther that civil rights guy? Well, in a way, yes. Even though the lives of the two Martins were lived five centuries apart, Martin Luther - like Dr. King - fought for what he believed in, which was the sanctity of

the scriptures and of Christ's church. Both led a world-changing reform movement. And the legacies of both leaders can be felt, heard and seen even today.