

LUTHER'S DISCOVERY

(The Bible's Greatest Hits II, 5)

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

October 30, 1977
Reformation Sunday

Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

"For the gospel reveals how God puts men right with himself: it is through faith, from beginning to end. As the scripture says, 'He who is right with God through faith shall live.'"

Romans 1:17 (Today's English Version - Good News)

The Letter of Paul to the Romans makes difficult reading for most people today. It is the nearest thing to a theological treatise in the Bible. Some of the characteristic ideas and symbols are foreign to contemporary life. Some may prove repugnant. The Letter to the Romans strikes us as the primary source of those traditional doctrines which many modern Christians find most offensive. It is here in Romans that we seem to come to that gulf between Jesus' own approach to religion and that which has been promoted by Paul and his interpreters.

Luther too presents obstacles. We may have read that he was a pathological case or that his movement was essentially a screen for German nationalism and the rise of capitalism. We have heard that some of the things he said at the family dinner table hardly would be allowed in an X-rated movie. His attitude toward the peasants when they revolted was brutal and his relationship with Zwingli and other reformers was intolerant. And in any case, we are not Lutherans. Some of us may be here in part because we decided not to be Lutherans.

So then, to think on a Sunday morning about Luther and Romans coming together may not seem to be a very inviting prospect. At best, perhaps, it is a chore we have to go through every so often in order to understand our own history. We do have to admit that Paul's Letter to the Romans set things moving from time to time. It was while reading a passage in Romans that Augustine of Hippo came to a decisive change in his life that led to his becoming the most influential Christian thinker since Paul himself. It was while listening to a sermon on Romans that John Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed" and went on to become the leader of a spiritual awakening that reached throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. It was in writing a commentary on Romans at the end of World War I that a young Swiss pastor, Karl Barth, shook the daylights out of liberal Protestantism. He said that he felt like a man who while climbing a church tower in the dark accidentally took hold of the bell rope and awoke the whole town.

Through the centuries the Letter to the Romans has revealed the power to make a tremendous difference both for individuals and for the church as a whole. And surely we cannot deny that Luther made a difference. Tomorrow marks the 460th anniversary of the moment when he tacked his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg. That was but one incident in a larger event. Yet this incident marks what for our culture remains the most important religious event in the last five hundred years. Perhaps we are living in a "Post-Protestant Era." Yet without Romans and without Luther it would be impossible to understand how we got where we are. Beyond that, it is my personal conviction that what Martin Luther found in Romans 1:17 still defines the distinctive thing about what it means to be a Protestant Christian.

That is true even though so many Protestant Christians believe and behave on a very different basis. Polls taken from time to time have shown that a majority of Americans will answer questions in a way that reveals that they do not truly believe in the freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. Often, indeed, a majority will vote in favor of proposals that deny freedom of speech, or of the press, or of assembly. Still we know that if we were to cut the Bill of Rights out of the constitution we would cut the heart out of the American system. Many Protestants reveal that they hold a view of the Christian life that is moralistic and legalistic. Yet we should know that if we were to cut the message of justification by faith out of Protestantism we would strip Protestant Christianity of its life blood.

But let us try to see what this great discovery was that Luther made in the book of Romans. What was the so-called "revelation in the tower" that came to this Augustinian monk and professor while he was preparing a series of lectures on the Psalms? In a moment we shall turn to Luther's own account of that event. For the present let us try to see what Luther's problem was, and let us try to do so in very simple terms. For the past week I have been reading for the first time the study called Young Man Luther by Erik Erikson, the famous psychoanalyst. Were I competent to do so I might try to describe Luther's hangups in Erikson's terms. But that would only get us into a mire of fancy terminology as sticky as the scholastic theology of Luther's day. So let us take a simple-minded approach, for, as you know, I am a simple-minded guy.

In order to make contact with our own time suppose we leave out God for a moment. Luther was unable to do that, but that is where our culture usually starts. That is to say we see our hangups as purely personal without reference to some "higher power", as they say in A.A. Starting there we may say that Martin Luther was a fellow who had a hard time feeling good about himself. His sense of self-worth was very low.

Part of the trouble was that Luther had a very bad conscience. If we were to ask, "What did he do that was so bad?" we would have a hard time finding an answer. Modern Protestants who have forgotten the meaning of Protestantism are fond of basing their religion on the Ten Commandments. Well, if we trot out the Ten Commandments it seems unlikely that in any direct and open way Martin Luther broke any of them. The only one on which we might bring a charge against him is the last - the one about coveting. This commandment is a different ball game from the others because it has to do with inner attitudes. Later on, after the great change in his life, Luther said that the 10th commandment (in his way of counting it was the 9th and 10th) was set before us as a goal only to be realized in the life to come. "For wicked inclinations do not wholly die," he said, "until the flesh turns to dust and is new created." ¹

That was only common sense. Knowing that and going to confession he should have got along all right like most other monks. But my guess is that Luther probably internalized all the other commandments too. After all, there is precedent for that. Jesus internalized the law, and with dire results, we are told, for our mental health. As soon as you start going into motives and the spirit underlying your behavior, the Ten Commandments get to be a much messier proposition. You see, you may keep the Sabbath, but do so self-righteously; you may refrain from killing your neighbor, but

1. Martin Luther, A Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments etc. The "Philadelphia Edition" of The Works of Martin Luther, Vol. 2, p. 354.

still call him "thou fool" in your heart; you may refrain from sexual relationships outside the marriage covenant, but nevertheless, like Jimmy Carter, go "lusting after" people. Luther was the kind of person who was acutely aware of these possibilities and he got bogged down in them.

Even if we leave God out for a moment we run into this basic impasse. Some years ago Ralph Sundquist published a sermon called "Justification by Faith" in which he draws an interesting comparison between Martin Luther and the chief character in the novel, The Fall, by Camus. Now the great French author lived in a world without God and so does his character, Jean-Baptiste Clamence. Nevertheless, like Luther, Clamence comes out where Luther came out. No matter how deeply you peel the onion of self, it still stinks: "No excuses ever, for anyone." He writes:

"I deny the good intention, the respectable mistake, the indiscretion, the extenuating circumstance. With me there is no giving of absolution or blessing." ¹

(Our novel group will be reading The Fall in a few days and I shall make copies of Dr. Sundquist's sermon available to the group.)

Undoubtedly Luther was a sick person in some ways. He had this messed up relationship with his father. But his problem was very widespread in those days. If it had not been widespread, it is hard to see why Luther's raising the issue raised such a rumpus. And if Camus is representative of our time, and I suspect he is, perhaps the issue remains alive.

One other thing we might note about this impasse that obtains even when you leave God out for a moment. People have a characteristic way of trying to solve it. They try to be very, very good, like the little girl with the curl in her better moments. They work very, very hard like the third little pig. They go to school and get good grades. They go to work and get promoted. They join all sorts of clubs and get elected. They try to prove themselves. That is to say they try to prove to themselves that they should feel good about themselves. But it doesn't work. Unless you start out with that feeling you never arrive at it. You just work up a frenzy.

But, of course, we can't leave God out, not for the middle ages, not for Luther. Then the problem was to get right with God. And there was a carefully contrived system for achieving that end. I have called it here in the past "a brownie point system."

That is not quite fair either to the late medieval church or to the brownies. But it is the simplest way of describing the way things worked. If you built up enough brownie points you made it to heaven; if you didn't, you went to the other place. The chances were that you would have to spend some time in between, in purgatory. However, because the church kept on account a fund of extra brownie points deposited by the saints, the church in its gracious compassion, could shorten your stay there. That's what the sale of indulgences was all about. By contributing to a worthy cause you could cash in on those extra points and cut your stay in purgatory. In the case of a plenary indulgence you could cut it down to nothing. In those theses he tacked on the church door Luther said that shrewd people were asking, "If the Pope is so big-hearted and has the power, why doesn't he

1. Quoted by Ralph R. Sundquist, Jr. in "Justification by Faith," Presbyterian Life, April 15, 1961, p. 17.

just bail everybody out of purgatory forthwith and save all that needless suffering?" 1

Despite the defects in this system, there is no doubt that many of Luther's contemporaries did "find peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord." But for Luther and for a lot of other people the system got in the way. It did not work psychologically and it did not work theologically. It was pretty hard to love a God who was waiting there at the end of the line to tote up your brownie points. Luther felt that his own righteousness would never put him right with God. When he read about "God's righteousness" in the Psalms that phrase only troubled him because it seemed to refer to a standard of justice that he could never satisfy. God's righteousness could only mean God's just condemnation of the sinner. Then Luther turned to Romans 1:17 and he got a new slant on the matter. But let him tell you what happened.

"I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the justice of God,' because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement 'The just shall live by his faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise." 2

In other words God's justice or righteousness is that holy love revealed in Christ which accepts us sinners despite our unacceptability. It is not that God declares black to be white. It is not that he stops making demands of us or insisting that we do good deeds. Rather he extends to us the power of his forgiving love from the very start. Our relationship with God is not some mathematical computation that will go through the cash register when we get to the end of the line. Right now, in this moment and at every moment, God declares to us through Christ that we are of worth to him and that consequently we should live as if we were of worth to ourselves.

Dr. Erikson sums up Luther's "revelation in the tower" very well:

"Luther saw that God's justice is not confined to a future day of judgment based on our record on earth when he will have the 'last word'. Instead, this justice is in us, in the here and now; for, if we will only perceive it, God has given us faith to live by, and we can perceive it by understanding the word which is Christ." 3

1. A rather loose paraphrase of Luther's 82nd thesis.
2. Roland Bainton, Here I Stand, p. 65.
3. Erik Erikson, Young Man Luther, p. 201.

"God has given us faith to live by." It is of the utmost importance that we see that both for Paul and for Luther, faith is a gift. If we think of faith as some sort of condition we have to meet first, some inner work of the soul by which we earn God's mercy, then we are right back in the bog of despair again. Faith is what happens when the good news of God's accepting love takes hold of us. As Anders Nygren put it:

"It is not man's faith that gives the gospel its power; quite the contrary, it is the power of the gospel that makes it possible for one to believe."¹

This is what Luther discovered in the Letter to the Romans. He knew, as Paul knew, that you cannot get right with God or with yourself, or with anybody, for that matter, so long as you start out with distrust and misgivings and in a frenzied way try to earn your way into God's good graces. Both Paul and Luther would agree with the Camus character, Clamence, that none of us has any excuse. We cannot satisfy the righteousness of God; we cannot even satisfy our own consciences. But once we know that in spite of this fact, God accepts us, we are set free. Out of that freedom come lives that are loving and responsible and liberated from the sort of guilt that cramps our style without improving our performance.

"The just shall live by faith"

or in Today's English Version

"He who is right with God through faith shall live."

In a world without God the need for faith may not seem to arise. But for deep and probing spirits it always arises. They know that neither they themselves, nor any other human, can extend to them that grace that makes their lives worthwhile in spite of everything to the contrary. Jean Baptiste Clamence knows this and in knowing that is a better Protestant than most. But for him there is no way out. His best move is only the courage of despair. For Paul and for Luther there is this gift from beyond themselves that makes all the difference. And if we think this message belongs to a different world from that of Jesus, I suggest you bring to mind again the parable on a father and two sons about which I preached a few weeks ago. There you will see in the elder brother that brownie pointer who does everything right yet cannot experience his father's love. There you will observe the power of that gospel which declares to the prodigal:

"For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

1. Anders Nyren, Commentary on Romans, p. 71.