

# MAKE IT COUNT!

## Sermon, October 29, 2017

### Reformation Sunday

**Texts: Ecclesiastes 12:9-14; Matthew 10:26-28, 12:36-37**

In 1505, a promising student dropped out of law school (*much to the consternation of his copper-miner father, who had high hopes for his brilliant son*), sold his books, and on July 17 of that year entered an Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, Germany. He made solemn vows of loyalty to God and the church as he became a monk. Two years later, 1507, he repeated those vows of loyalty to God and loyalty to the church as he was ordained to the priesthood. Five years after that, October 19, 1512, he was awarded the degree Doctor of Theology and two days later (*October 21, 1512*) again reiterated his vows of loyalty to God and loyalty to the church as he joined the faculty of the University of Wittenberg as Doctor in Bible. Five years after that, on October 31, 1517 ... 500 years ago this coming Tuesday ... Dr. Martin Luther posted ninety-five issues of concerns, ninety-five theses, ninety-five issues for debate, on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. At the time, these were simply the theological concerns of an unheard-of Augustinian monk. Martin Luther had no idea what a religious and political upheaval he would set in motion; all he wanted to do was to get a constructive conversation started in the church he loved, a church he served faithfully. It was a church he knew was not perfect, but it was a church he never wanted to leave. (*I'm reminded of the old adage, "If you ever find the perfect church, by all means, don't go! You'll ruin it!"*) However, it was a church he was forced to leave when he was excommunicated. It's a popular misconception that Luther left the Catholic church to start "protestantism." No, Luther had no intention of creating a schism in the church. He was a reformer, not a renegade. He was a man of his word who took his vows of membership and ordination seriously, hoping to re-form the church from within.

The story is told that once when Luther was bemoaning his problems with the church hierarchy (*it is historically documented that Luther, like many people who are highly gifted, creative and energetic, was plagued by occasional bouts of crippling depression*), a friend said, "*Oh Martin, you take yourself too seriously. A hundred years from now who will even know about your troubles with the pope?*" Who will know, indeed? Here we are FIVE hundred years later, and it is no understatement to assert that Luther's faithfulness affected the entire course of world history. We all may have something in common with Martin Luther. I'm sure there are times we may wonder if it's worth the effort, there are times in all of our lives when we may wonder if we're taking ourselves too seriously in our own determination to do what is right, in our own efforts to elevate the atmosphere around us in workplaces, our homes, our classrooms, in our efforts to get a good and constructive and productive conversation going. But like Martin Luther, we never know how our faithfulness may reverberate. One of the great blessings of following a living God, a God Who is actively engaged in His creation, is that we can place our faithful efforts and work in His hands. Our job is simply to be faithful in the moment at hand. After all (*as we often affirm in this congregation, in that refrain taught to us by the late Rev. Dr. Tyler Johnson*), God is good! [ALL THE TIME!] And all the time, [GOD IS GOOD!] And we should strive to be good ALL THE TIME as well.

One beautiful fall day in 1994, soon after Steve was born ... it was actually the week before Reformation Sunday ... I was walking my dog, Samson; we were on the property of a large construction company adjacent to my home, a property owned by a member of my former congregation (*I told you this story in 2001 ... if you remember, I'm flattered!*). Samson was a large Black Labrador mix with a huge "WOOF" that could rattle the walls in his younger years; to some he was an intimidating, fearsome looking-and-sounding dog, but to those who knew him he was a gentle, playful, friendly (*and actually quite timid*) gentle giant. Samson heard another dog bark in the distance, and being a dog, Samson did what came naturally. He responded; he barked back with his characteristic-from-the-bottom-of-his-basement "WOOF!" Well, as chance would have it, Samson was standing next to a large drainage conduit, a concrete culvert about five feet in diameter, down near the stream. His bark was amplified by the natural echo chamber effect of that culvert, and it echoed his much-amplified bark right back at him! This amplified **WOOF** came back out of that culvert and boy, did he jump! And then he took off running with a yelp in the other direction. Note three things: **1.** Samson faithfully responded in a way consistent with his character, and **2.** He was in the "right" place at the right time when he faithfully responded according to his character, and as a result **3.** His faithful response was amplified much louder and carried much farther than he expected! The result greatly surprised him. And being a pastor on that week before Reformation Sunday, I thought to myself, "*That'll preach!*"

Martin Luther also reacted and responded in a way consistent with his character. He had to "bark," he had to speak up, he had to faithfully respond in the moment at hand. And due to a number of coinciding circumstances and simultaneous events (*such as the invention of Gutenberg's printing press*), Luther's bark carried louder and farther than I'm sure he ever imagined, and I'm sure the result greatly surprised him! (*An excellent PBS presentation called "Martin Luther and the Idea That Changed the World"<sup>1</sup> asserted Martin Luther was the first real celebrity created by mass media; his writings were spread throughout the European world of the time via the newly-invented media tools. Last year the German Cultural Council prepared a*

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.pbs.org/show/martin-luther-idea-changed-world/>

publication in preparation for this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary entitled "Martin Luther Superstar"<sup>2</sup>) He was **faithful in the moment at hand** ... he consistently and faithfully responded to the situations he faced, his faithfulness was carried and amplified and echoed by a divine drainage culvert, and his faithful response(s) to the moment at hand reverberated throughout the western world and still reverberates to this day! You just never know how your faithful actions will reverberate. The result may surprise you! Renowned scholar and noted historian Martin Marty wrote a highly-readable little book entitled *October 31, 1517 – Martin Luther and the Day That Changed the World*<sup>3</sup> and that title is not hyperbole. It really could be said that what happened five hundred years ago this Tuesday would go on to change the entire course of world history religiously, politically and socially. It's not within the scope of this sermon to fully go into that, but let me just point out we are sitting here on this side of the ocean in a region called New England that was settled by people inspired by ideals that sprung from the Reformation sparked by the faithfulness of this monk who barked five hundred years ago. Those rugged, backboned, faithful and fearless Puritans who braved the dangers of an ocean crossing to settle in a dangerous and untamed wilderness did so largely because they wanted to model, in what they called their New England, a distinctively Christian community that they hoped would be emulated in Old England. Be faithful in the moment at hand ... again, you never know just how God may use your faithfulness.

In the little time remaining, and in honor of the faithfulness of this former law student we remember this week, I'd like to focus on another motivation to be faithful in the moment at hand that is found in our Scripture readings this morning. The Bible tells us everything we do ... *everything* ... has eternal significance. 100% of everything we do matters ... forever! Now, this is one of the more *troubling* and at the same time one of the most *comforting* teachings of the Scripture. We read this in the final chapter in Ecclesiastes (*"For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."*), and Jesus re-asserts this in the Gospels. Everything we say and do will be made known; there is nothing that will remain hidden, and everything we say and do and say will be brought into account, as if everything we say and do is being recorded on a celestial camcorder to be played back when we stand before God at the Judgment ... or, if that imagery is now outdated in this day of social media and iPhones, it's as if everything we do is forever posted on an eternal Facebook page or Snapchat account for all to see. (*I like the cartoon sent to me by a good friend with the caption: "The best part of being over 50 is that we did all our stupid stuff before the Internet!"*)

I believe this is one of the most glorious biblical teachings because it underscores that every single thing we do or say **matters**, somehow, for ever! What we do and say matters so much that God gave His only begotten Son to make our deeds and words eternally significant! God means for us ... all of us ... to have real significance in all that we do in every moment of our everyday lives. That is why for **every** word, **every** deed, **every** action (*and every non-action, for that matter*) we will be called into account! Now, here's the wonderful caveat ... because of God's wonderful grace through Jesus Christ, all those things that we have said or done or left undone which are *not* good can be forgiven, blotted out, erased from the "tape," deleted from the "timeline," removed from our record ... forever! And if the bad is thus erased, then what remains? The good! That's what shows; that's what remains ... all those times we were faithful. All those times we attempted to do or say what is good and right and noble and helpful and constructive and so on. All those things we did to honor the God we serve. They will last forever!

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't want to have a lot of blank spaces on the "recording" or "timeline" of my life! This Biblical teaching makes me want to make every moment of my life count! I want my eternal Facebook page to be full of GOOD STUFF. This calls to mind a classic poem by C.T. Studd, a British missionary at the turn of the twentieth century:

*Two little lines I heard one day, Traveling along life's busy way;  
Bringing conviction to my heart, and from my mind would not depart;  
"Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last."*

*Only one life, yes only one, soon will its fleeting hours be done;  
Then, in 'that day' my Lord to meet, and stand before His Judgment seat;  
"Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last." (It goes on for six more stanzas)<sup>4</sup>*

I can't say this emphatically enough ... every single thing we do or say counts forever! I don't fully understand **how** it will count, but the Bible assures us it **will**. To paraphrase Ecclesiastes 12:13 -- *"This is the bottom line ... if you understand nothing else, get this... fear God, keep His commandments; this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."* How many times have you loitered there in bed and wondered, *"What difference does it make if I get out of bed today?"* It does make a difference if I get up, if for no other reason than everything I do and say that day will somehow count forever. And we'll never know the full extent of the potential reverberations of our faithful lives well lived. So, let's try to make every moment of our life count for good.

Because right now counts forever.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.amazon.de/Martin-Luther-Superstar-Jahre-Reformation/dp/3934868401>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.amazon.com/October-31-1517-Martin-Changed/dp/1612616569>

<sup>4</sup> See <http://paulhockley.com/2016/05/24/quote-only-one-life-twill-soon-be-past-poem-by-c-t-studd/>