

# ONE LIFE TO LIVE, SO MAKE IT COUNT!

Sermon, October 31, 2021

Reformation Sunday

Texts: Ecclesiastes 12:9-14, Mark 12:28-34 (Matthew 10:26-28, 12:36-37)

The sermon title is from a classic poem by C.T. Studd, a British missionary at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> 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 seven more stanzas)*

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 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. (*That was October 21, 1512 ... exactly 472 years before I was ordained; last Wednesday marked my 37<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ordination!*) Five years after that, on October 31, 1517 ... 504 years ago today ... 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 a relatively unheard-of Augustinian monk/priest. 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, he was forced to leave the church when he was excommunicated. It's a popular misconception that Luther left the Catholic church to start "protestantism." No, Luther had no intention of causing a schism in the church. He was a reformer, not a renegade. A promise keeper, not a promise breaker. 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 at a table conversation with a friend, the friend said, "*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 over FIVE hundred years later, and it is no understatement to assert that Luther's faithfulness affected the entire course of world history. I'm sure there are times in our lives 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 conscientiously do what is right and good in our homes, our classrooms, our workplaces, our state, our nation, in our efforts to get a good and constructive and productive and wholesome and helpful conversation going. But, like Luther, we never know how our faithfulness may reverberate. One of the great blessings of following a living and active God 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 God is good! [ALL THE TIME!] And all the time, [GOD IS GOOD!] And we should strive to be good and faithful ALL THE TIME as well.

One beautiful fall day in 1994, about six months after my son 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 this story maybe 4 times over my nearly 25 years here, I like to bring it out every five years or so*). Samson was a large Black Labrador/German shepherd mix with a huge "WOOF" that could rattle the walls; to some he was an intimidating, fearsome looking-and-sounding dog, but to those who knew him Samson 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 he took off running with a yelp in the other direction. Note three things: **1.** Samson 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 and 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! (*Four years ago an excellent PBS presentation called "Martin Luther and the Idea That Changed the World" asserted Martin Luther was the first real celebrity created by mass media; <sup>1</sup> his writings were spread throughout the European world of the time via the newly-invented media tools. Five years ago the German Cultural Council put out a publication in preparation for the 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 situation he faced, his faithfulness was carried and amplified and echoed by something of an historical "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! 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 hyperbolic. It really could be said that what happened five hundred and four years ago today 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 in pews on this side of the ocean in a region called New England that was settled by people inspired by Reformation ideals sparked by the faithfulness of this monk who stood his ground and "barked." Those backboneed, faithful, fearless Puritans who braved the perils 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 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 Martin Luther's faithfulness, I'd like to focus on another motivation to be faithful in the moment at hand that is found in our Old Testament Scripture reading this morning. The Bible tells us everything we do ... *everything* ... has eternal significance. 100% of everything we do matters ... forever! As we read in the final chapter in Ecclesiastes (*"For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."*), and as Jesus re-asserts this a few times in the Gospels, everything we say and do will be made known; nothing will remain hidden, everything we say and do will be brought into account, as if it's all being recorded on a huge celestial camcorder to be played back when we stand before God at the Judgment ... or, in this day of social media and iPhones, as if everything we do is forever posted on an eternal Facebook page or Snapchat or Twitter account for all to see (*I'm reminded of a cartoon sent to me by a good friend: "The best part of being over 60 is that we did all our stupid stuff before the Internet!" And as we are warned, nothing ever disappears from 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 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 eternal Facebook ... forever! (*which doesn't happen on the internet!*) If the bad is thus "erased by grace," then what remains? Only the good! That's what shows; that's what remains forever for those forgiven by Jesus Christ ... 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 ... in short, all those things we did to honor the God we serve ... they will somehow 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 that was motivated by love of God and neighbor. 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 out of love for God and neighbor that day will somehow count forever! And we'll never know the full extent in this life of the potential reverberations of our faithful lives well lived.

So, let's make every moment of our "one life to live" COUNT for good.

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

<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>