

Reformation 500

I visited Wittenberg in the summer of 2005. I had just attended the biannual ecumenical conference of Societas Liturgica in Dresden. I stayed over a few days to explore that region of Germany, especially two cities: Wittenberg and Leipzig, where Johann Sebastian Bach served as the cantor of the Thomaskirche. After the Sunday morning service, I joined other worshipers in prayer above the grave of Bach. I don't want to shock anyone here, but Bach was a Lutheran.

From there I rode the train to Wittenberg. The castle church still stands, but the door upon which Martin Luther may or may not have nailed his 95 theses had been replaced with a newer one long ago. On the other side of that door, I visited and prayed over the tomb of Martin Luther. We wouldn't have had the music of Bach if we had not received the theology of Luther. Thomas Aquinas, famous among other things for his five proofs for the existence of God, died about 250 years before the Reformation. If he had been born after Bach, upon hearing his music, Aquinas would have had six proofs for the existence of God.

One problem with having a dispute for 500 years is that points of convergence get overlooked. One reason the dispute has lasted so long is out of respect for the generations who kept it alive. To resolve it weirdly threatens to dishonor those who remained faithful to it.

We all strive to be faithful, but faithful to what? Faithful to whom? Well, we should be faithful to Christ, and not to any other ideal. Christ is our way. Christ is our truth. Christ is our life. All of us - Lutherans and Catholics - we are merely branches upon this vine. You would think that we branches would sing in harmony, but this does not always happen. Some Catholics do not want to speak to Lutherans, and some Lutherans want no consort with Catholics. "Why would we commemorate the Reformation?" people want to know. Well, we must. We must recall the deeds of our ancestors, the beliefs strongly held, the decisions poorly made. We should also recall the love they had for their families, for the church, and for Christ. Although these 500 years tell a story of opposition, they also tell a story of faithful love.

Christ is our common source and our common hope. We still do not share communion together, but we do share baptism. If a Catholic decides to be known as Lutheran, or a Lutheran becomes Catholic, we do not rebaptize. In baptism we agree: we share the life of Christ. He is the strong vine to whom we still cling after 500 years.

Sadly we need still more years to build greater unity, but we are well positioned. Catholic and Lutheran congregations would not have organized an event like this on the 400th anniversary of the Reformation, and it would have been even more unthinkable on the 100th anniversary. But here we are. Perhaps the 600th anniversary will usher in a time of thanksgiving for those who believe together in Christ and show their mutual love in communion.

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul pares down the mystery of salvation to two individuals: Adam and Christ. Where Adam sinned, Christ has redeemed. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Individual actions have tremendous power. Martin Luther unleashed the force of one person who stood

Sunday, October 29, 2017

Reformation 500

and could not do anything else for the sake of personal integrity and the future of the church he loved. He changed history because he uncovered some of the deepest yearnings of the human heart: both faithfulness and reform.

The 95 theses were probably hand delivered, not nailed to a door. They were not a brazen tattoo, but an appeal for dialogue. They did not rail against a closed door; they tried to pry it open. The door on that castle church is gone anyway, and all it did was mark the threshold between secular and sacred, human and divine, despair and hope. Every individual one of us has our own door - a door that either keeps people out or lets them in. You as an individual decided to come here today because you so wanted to stand here that you could do nothing else. Individuals have power. As we Catholics and Lutherans gather in this sacred space, let us remember that a door can open to dialogue and friendship, faith and celebration. All of that can happen when we realize that the door we see between us is none other than Christ.