

Sermon: 500 Years of Contradiction

Year A, Proper 25

[Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 1; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46](#)

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[On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 theses which he wanted to debate to the church door in Wittenberg Castle. He posted his notice in time to catch the crowds attending the November 1 All Souls services. As a professor, this was the normal way to invite a public debate on a topic. He was laying out his argument, making it easy for others to find the flaws in his reasoning. Luther was not an easy man. Seeking truth mattered to him, mattered more than a peaceful life. He loved God and longed to follow God to the utmost of his ability. Luther was also an able man, apparently. He was not the first to urge that the Church of Rome be reformed, but it was his commitment to revitalize a faith which he believed had strayed from Biblical teaching that ushered in the Protestant Reformation. 500 years later, a country church on a continent not even mapped when Luther posted his invitation to debate, is still debating how best to serve God to the fullest of our capacities.]

In the reading from 1 Thessalonians, Paul reviews all the charges against him.¹ He must have been in jail for a reason. His preaching was either delusional, immoral or intended to delude others. He was trying to please people, not God. Paul was only preaching for what he could get from it financially. He sought personal prestige. He was a dictator. That's quite a list given that he said the Thessalonians already knew all about it.

Paul objects he was none of those things. And he wasn't. We would not be here today, there would not be Christians here today, without the untiring work Paul did to bring the message of Jesus Christ to the people beyond the land of Israel, or even the city of Jerusalem.

But think about the list. You can see how he'd be accused of all of those things. Because when religious cult leaders betray their people, isn't that what we all say? They were dictators, only in it for the money. They always served their own twisted interest, never God's.

We're not surprised to hear a fallen cult leader, or fallen church leader, described that way. How come? Because we know how rotten people are, on the whole. It's not like we've gotten any better in the last 2,000 years. Think of the news. When Hurricane Irma was headed for Florida, there was a line of people waiting to buy generators. The last person to get a generator gave it to the lady behind him in line because someone in her house was on oxygen. That's so unusual that it makes the national news. Martin Luther pointed out that we were all depraved. And while we don't really like the sound of "depraved," he wasn't wrong. We are sinful. We are very willing to turn away from the people God is calling us to be to live an easier, more comfortable life. We just are.

In the reading from Matthew, we hear Jesus answer the question, *which commandment in the law is the greatest?* (Matthew 22:36) He quotes first from Deuteronomy, reciting a bit of a prayer that every Jew recited and recites every day, the Shema. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.* (Matthew 22:37) Then he adds *And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:39). God's love

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975): 187-190.

is so immense, so unbounded, so unending that the only way to come into contact with it is to love what it loves.² The only way to come into contact with it is to love everything.

And there, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is the main insight of the Reformation that Martin Luther kicked off 500 years ago. We are hopelessly depraved. God's love is boundless. Both are true. And they cannot be made to fit the one with the other.

But oh don't we want them to fit? If we just eat locally, exercise more, reduce our carbon footprint, give more to charity, engage politically, get through the books on our bedside tables, clean out the garage, go to church on Sunday, can't we take care of that depraved thing? We all have that thing that we know if we could just do it, we could stop worrying about how sinful we are, how far away from perfect we are. And it's never going to happen. We may do whatever it is we think we need to do. But we are not going to be perfect. Because we are human. Not divine. No matter what we do, we are still going to be depraved. No matter what we do, we cannot save ourselves.

Look at it the other way. If you did whatever it is you think you have to do to be saved, isn't that saying that God didn't love you the way you are now but God will love you once you check the box? How does that accord with the preaching and teaching of Jesus? How does that fit with our understanding of God? Any time we put a limit on God's love, we are missing the message that God's love is all there is, God's love encompasses everything. There's no limit in time or space.

So we're just supposed to give up and smoke cigarettes and eat deep fried Snickers bars? If that is where the insight of the Reformation leads us, you'd think the churches would be a lot more full, especially the Protestant ones.

We are depraved, constantly pulling ourselves away from God and thinking the worst of people, even deeply loving people like Paul. It is beyond our capability to save ourselves. We have to rely on something bigger than ourselves for salvation. Our capacity to sin is infinite. So the thing we have to rely on has to be infinite as well. Nothing is bigger than God's love.

We are loved not because we have checked some box or another, but because we simply are. We are. And that is all it takes. And if that is all it takes, then isn't living a life that takes us a few tottering steps toward God a blessing? Isn't it such a relief that we can at least try to show how grateful we are for the love which is so freely given? We don't even have to try to save ourselves, and we can just live a life that shows gratitude for that truth.

The minute we forget either that we're depraved or that God's love is truly infinite, then someone will pop up to sell us an indulgence. We want to think we can save ourselves if we just put enough money in the right envelope at the right time. We want to think that God will love us more if we make the right move in front of the right people at the right moment. That's what an indulgence is, it's believing the fiction that we can control human nature or we can control God's love with our own resources.

It's fiction and that's what drove Luther crazy. Drove Luther so crazy that he kept pointing it out. Even when he was threatened with death. Even when he was threatened with eternal damnation.

² Tim Breach-Verhe, "Proper 25, Theological Perspective, Matthew 22:34-46" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 214.

Even when wars broke out because of what he said. He kept going back, again and again to Scripture and saying, “Show me. Show me how humans get to decide who gets in to heaven and who doesn’t.” Because of all the things the Bible leaves a little fuzzy, the Bible is very clear that we don’t get to make the call. God does.

In this season of stewardship, I know you have plenty of places who need your financial support, including the church. I certainly support other organizations outside the church. But your pledge is your opportunity to stand with this seemingly contradictory truth that we have been coming to terms with for 500 years. We can support programs that help people bring their lives closer to God, like AA and Marguerite’s Place and Harbor Homes. We can and we should. We can put our energies towards sharing the palpable, almost tangible feeling of God’s love we experience here in the church.

Our pledge to the church is more than that, though. It is a sign that we accept the grace that God has given us. It is a sign that we are grateful for that grace. It is a sign that we want to remain deeply connected with a group of people, stretching back centuries, who have been willing to reach out to the world fully aware that nothing is bigger than humanity’s ability to turn away from God except the love of God. Our pledge says that not only are we aware of that contradiction, but that we embrace it. Because we are embraced by God *like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children* (1 Thessalonians 2:7). That that contradiction is so powerful that it drove Luther to the door of the church in Wittenberg, and it drove Paul, slandered on all sides, to share not only the gospel of God but also his own self, because the Thessalonians had become very dear to him. (1 Thessalonians 2:8). We embrace that contradiction because we know it to be true. And we are so very grateful that we do not have to save ourselves. We are so very grateful that God loves us that much.