

THANK YOU, MARTIN LUTHER—CELEBRATING OUR GREAT CONFESSIONS:

Confessing Christ in a Secular Culture

Matthew 16:13-18

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In his book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Brian McLaren says that every generation faces a great challenge, and, in each case, the people of that time must decide how they will respond. Today I'm going to talk about two significant moments in the history of Christianity. The Reformation, which took place in the 1500's and the earliest Christian church between the year 30 and the year 100.

We have the people who rose to the occasion in these moments to thank for much of what we understand about our faith today. They were imperfect people that God used to share good news in times of despair and uncertainty.

You may have noticed Martin Luther's name in our sermon series title. You may also have noticed our preaching schedule is a little different this month and it just so happens that Melissa and I are preaching the first two sermons in this series. I don't want to put any undue pressure on you all, but if you happened to bump into Doyle and if the subject of Martin Luther comes up, it would make me really happy if you could tell Doyle at least one thing he doesn't know about Martin Luther. This is the perfect opportunity to use the "Sermon Notes" section of your bulletin.

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Germany. Out of the eight children in his middle class family, he was selected as the son who would be educated and wealthy and have a better life than his parents had. So, Martin went off to school and studied law, specifically canon law, which was the law of the church. Remember, this is a very different time; we still have the Roman empire with rule by local princes.

Luther came home from school for a visit in 1505 and he was caught up in a terrible thunderstorm. He took cover under a tree and thought he was surely going to die. As he is huddling under this tree, sure it's the end of his life, he cries out to St. Anne and says "St. Anne! If you will save me I will become a monk!"

Something you may already know about Luther is that he was a man of high moral conviction. So, when he was saved from the storm, he felt he must leave his promising future in law behind and become a monk. His parents were not happy.

The church was extremely corrupt in Luther's time.¹ It was the most powerful political institution of the time and people used the buying and selling of indulgences to gain power in the church, thus giving them political power in the region. Priests, who were supposed to be celibate, were promiscuous, had many illegitimate children for whom they purchased indulgences and positions in the church. During this time many clergy were not even trained in the traditions of the church or in theology.

As we'd assume, the general public lost faith in the church. So, in October of 1517, when Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg Castle Church Door, he quickly gained much support, particularly from young people.

At the time, there was a process a person had to go through in order to receive absolution, or forgiveness for their sins. They had to feel bad for what they'd done (this is called contrition); they had to confess the sin to a priest; and then they had to "satisfy" the sin by doing good works, going on a pilgrimage, or buying indulgences. Indulgences had become a tremendously common practice in the church.

Had these conditions not existed when Luther posted his 95 theses, there may have been no major changes in the church. But because people were so fed up with the way things were, Luther sparked tremendous debate and councils, significant reformation in the Catholic church, and the formation of the Protestant tradition.

In the same way, there were certain historical and cultural factors at play that allowed Christianity to emerge and survive in the years between Jesus' death and the time it became the religion of the state under Constantine. This was a time of great uncertainty and conflict. The average life expectancy was maybe half of what it is now; life was very difficult. People lived at the mercy of the violent Roman empire, which occupied vast territories promising justice, wealth, and stability but often the opposite occurred. People had no faith in the promise of the empire.

The Jewish people continued to wait for a messiah who would bring about their promised future. Yet, they still lived as subjugated people who had no control over their land. There was increasing division among Jewish sects and increasing disagreement about how the promised future would occur. The lack of faith in the political and religious institutions resulted in the practice of mystery religions, which were not Judaism and were not Roman pagan worship, but other types of idol worship.

¹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 2: The Reformation to the Present Day*, Harper Collins: New York, 2010, 7-9.

Scholars cannot be sure where or when Matthew's Gospel was first published, but they do know it was probably sometime between the year 70 and the year 100 in an area where the Christian church and the synagogue were in "continual contact and conflict" and where Jewish influence was strong enough to "bring serious trouble to the communities of Christian believers." Christians were often brought before the local *Sanhedrin*, they were flogged in the synagogue, and fled from town to town to escape persecution.²

Somehow, in the first 300 years of its existence, the church flourished under persecution, thanks to these first "evangelists" most of whose names we do not know; what we do know is the fervor and determination with which they shared the story of Jesus.

Each of these moments in Christian history shared a message that was powerful enough to stick around for 500 or 2,000 years. Think about how unbelievable that is: this tiny little region along the Mediterranean Sea, a tiny little people group with an even tinier group of twelve disciples and one rabbi who sparked a movement that would grow into Christianity.

What was the message of Luther's time?

Many of us have probably heard references to Luther's 95 theses, but after he hung his thesis up at the university which was a common way to announce academic debates, he wrote a series of writings that also stoked the fires. One of these was called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Christian Church* in which he claimed that:

"... the gospel had become captive to the institutional church. The medieval church...had imprisoned the gospel in a complex system of priests and sacraments. The church had become the master of the gospel, where it should be its servant."³

Luther sparked a storm of discussion and conflict and councils, which is actually not what he set out to do. He did not set out to create division in the church but to call the church on its practice of commodifying salvation. The gospel message of Luther's moment was: What if the church and all its rules and regulations cannot save you? What if we are saved simply because of God chooses to impart the gift of grace to us and not because of how good and perfect we are?

It's easy for us to take for granted these ideas because we hear so much about them, but this was a tremendous shift for the church and so much of how we understand the Bible, and salvation, and our role in our own faith goes back to this historical moment.

² Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew: Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*, Harper and Row, New York, 1982, 8.

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction, Fifth Edition*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 2011, 55.

When we study scripture, it's important for us to step back and ask "What did these words mean to the people who first read them?" We can't go back and interview the first Christians, but, thankfully, today's passage is pretty straightforward. Jesus starts a conversation with the disciples "So, who do people say the Son of Man is?" They murmur a few names—John the Baptist, [Elijah] Then he asks the question he really wants to ask "Well, who do you say I am?"

Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

In the time of the early church, the word "messiah" meant something different than it does to us. In Jewish thought, the messiah was a human figure anointed by God to bring about Israel's promised future, most likely through military victory. Prior to the time of Jesus, the term was used for prophets and priest, but most often reserved for kings, who were anointed with oil as public sign of being chosen by God for the role of king.⁴

Around the time of Jesus, during the Roman occupation, these messianic expectations became intertwined with nationalist feelings.⁵

How the title "messiah" came to be applied to Jesus is complicated. But what we do know is that the early church referred to Jesus as the Messiah; the early church, as we hear in Peter's words, believed Jesus to be the fulfilment of Jewish expectation and a continuation of Judaism.

We also know that Jesus did not fit the mold of "messiah" as defined by tradition. Jesus instructed his followers not to call him "Messiah", as we heard in today's passage. Jesus was not the political or military messiah expected in nationalist sects of Judaism. And, Jesus was not considered victorious because he suffered and died. The message of the early church was that God was up to something unexpected.

The other name Peter gives for Jesus is "son of the living God". Living was in opposition to the pagan gods and idols so popular at the time, objects and ideas which held no living hope for people. Living also contrasted with, dying, alluding to the amazing Good News of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and God's living and active presence at work in the world.

This is the earliest most fundamental message of Christianity: God is at work in the world through Jesus, who is risen from the dead. The earliest evangelists might say, "Have you heard about Jesus of Nazareth?"

The gospel has come to me most clearly this week, through these stories, in an unexpected way. The people of these moments were not perfect people. They weren't really even "goody two shoes" kinds of people.

⁴ Ibid., 277.

⁵ Ibid., 277.

Martin Luther was a little crazy. Before he discovered this new way of understanding God, he had major issues with obsessing over perfectionism. When he lived in a monastery, he wanted to be the most perfect monk he could be. Luther's confessor hid from him because he confessed so often and did things over and over again because he didn't feel like he was doing it right. He was a manic kind of guy. After Luther was basically kidnapped by the local prince to protect him from the higher authorities, it is well documented that Luther could be heard arguing with the devil in his tower, that he would throw his pen and his inkwell in the midst of these arguments and that you can still see the ink stain on the floor in the castle.

Luther was nearly driven mad by his fear that he was not saved and it was only through his revelation that salvation is a gift from God and it's not something he could earn by doing good or believing the right things. He was not a perfect person.

And then there's the disciple, Peter. Peter, Peter, Peter. I think I like Peter because he reminds me so much of myself, always jumping the gun, if you will. Acting a little too quickly. Not thinking before I speak.

The disciples get caught in a storm on the water, Jesus walks out to them on the sea, Peter jumps out of the boat ahead of the other disciples but then his confidence melts and he begins to sink. Peter makes this confident declaration in Matthew 16—"Jesus, you are the Messiah, Son of the living God!", but then, just a few verses when Jesus breaks the news to the disciples about the terrible suffering he will undergo, Peter says, "No Jesus, that couldn't possibly be what you're called to do." Jesus must sternly rebuke him, "Get behind me Satan." In the darkest hour of Jesus' life, Peter betrays him, denying three times that he even knows who Jesus is.

The truth is, as Richard Rohr says, there are no perfect people and no perfect institutions. Every one of us can survey our lives and provide ample evidence that we are not suited to build God's Kingdom. We could each write a book on the shortcomings of the church. Yet Jesus says to every one of us, and even to the church, "You're just who I'm looking for. Now, will you come and follow me?"

Earlier in Matthew chapter 16, the Pharisees came to Jesus and asked him for a sign that he is from God. Jesus told the Pharisees, "You can't even read the signs of your own time. How could you discern a sign from God?"

Let us be Christians who are awake to the needs, the challenges facing our world today. What good is it for us to ignore the needs in our community? In our world? What good is it for us to put ourselves to sleep?

Last night, I was making green beans and my daughter helped me. I said,

“Okay, now it’s time to add the salt.”

She said, “Mommy, what’s salt?”

I said, “Salt is a seasoning.”

She said, “Well, what’s seasoning?”

I said, “It’s what makes our food taste good.”

Jesus could be somewhat ambiguous, but he was quite clear when he said in Matthew chapter 5, “You are the salt of the earth.”

You give the world its savory flavor. You have within you the power to heal, to create, to restore, to build God’s dream in the world.

Let us be people who through our words and our actions ask, “Have you heard about Jesus of Nazareth? He is the Messiah, the son of the living God!”