

Reformed & Reforming
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Mark 10:46-52

Today is Reformation Sunday and we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of a legendary deed by Martin Luther in the early days of the Protestant Reformation. The story is that Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic monk, upset with certain practices of the Church wrote a letter called the "95 Theses," a 95-items-long list of complaints directed especially at the Pope, and he nailed it to the front door of All Saints' Church in Wittenburg, Germany on October 31, 1517.

Not only is the "95 Theses" the first historical record of a passive-aggressive note, it is widely considered to be the longest one ever written. You know what a passive-aggressive note is, don't you?

When I worked in marketing as an office manager for what was, at the time, a very small company, I had a co-worker, a receptionist named Jennifer (Jen for short). What I was told, at the time I was hired, was that I was to be Jen's boss. Unfortunately, none of the principals of the company who hired me wanted to tell Jen that.

Jen was a bizarre choice to be the one answering the phones, because she was rude and angry most of the time. On my very first day she decided that there should not be two Jen's at the company, especially in the same department, so she decided to call me Jenny. I asked her not to. In protest, she refused to speak my name in public. All the messages that she took for me she sprawled at the top "New Jenn".

Now, for those of you who are skilled at either creating passive aggressive notes or receiving them know that the means of attaching a note to a surface can greatly affect it's style points. Post-its are most common but suggest a hesitancy, a timidity. Packing tape, for example, makes a much stronger statement.

But nothing gives more oomph to your message than a few 10-penny nails. Bravo, Martin Luther, Bravo!

Okay, maybe I'm undervaluing his effort, but I do it to make a point. At the moment this once-timid, self-critical, and fearful monk let his hammer ring out, it would have been easy to dismiss his dissent as a foolish passive-aggressive absurdity.

I can imagine people muttering in the street, *"Well, I'm as much for change as everyone else, but this isn't the way to go about it – it's too loud, so obnoxious, it's no excuse to be impolite, how arrogant, it's sacrilegious, it's silly, it's just ugly – Martin Luther, BE QUIET."*

I think that sometimes we fear that kind of judgment. We see around us a world that is troubled: an environment being destroyed, a growing gap between the rich and the poor, basic human rights are under attack in so many places both here and abroad.

We are not blind to the problems, we feel them deeply, but we also fear being that lone, tiny voice crying out for the truth. And yet, for us especially, for Christians whose souls ache at the injustices in the world, acts of dissent can be spiritual listening-exercises with God through which we can transcend our high-strung fears and descend into the grace and freedom of the Gospel.

Martin Luther was not the horse you would have backed to be the impetus of long-lasting global social change and religious reformation. As a young man he was fearful, compulsive, even superstitious. He didn't sleep well, he didn't eat well, he didn't digest well – although he truly loved beer. Mortally afraid of his own death and God's judgment he left behind an excellent education and a promising academic career to enter the monastery.

In the monastery Luther buried himself in prayer, in fasting, in acts of repentance and mortification all in an attempt to reconcile himself with God. He was a small, scared, sickly man who was unhealthily obsessed with himself.

Luckily, his superiors could see this as well, and to get him out of the house and to redirect his energies into something actually useful! They ordered him out of the monastery and back into the academic life and Luther became a professor of theology and the Bible which seems to have chilled him out a little bit.

But while he was known to be opinionated, abrasive, and aggressive in theological debate, he was still not someone you would expect to take a risk or stand up to the greatest powers of his day.

In 1516, something would happen to change all that. A man named Johann Tetzel was sent by the Pope to Germany to raise money to build Saint Peter's Basilica by selling indulgences. An indulgence is a forgiveness of a certain amount of time in purgatory. So, in theory, you could spring your grandmother from purgatory by giving donations to the construction of the basilica.

And before you even ask, Brick Committee – this is not a thing for Congregationalists, so don't even try it. Blame the reformers!

Anyway, Luther abhorred Tetzel's unorthodox marketing strategies, he despised that the poor were being pressured to give to the basilica by Pope Leo X who had enough money personally to fund the entire project.

Perhaps most importantly, since entering the monastery Luther had been through the ringer with God and he knew it was Grace that had gotten him through. Luther had experienced firsthand that even the most extreme penances and the strictest religious life could not heal the separation he had felt between himself and God. As he studied the Bible, he began to formulate his thinking about this experience and came to understand that nothing we can do can earn us righteousness.

Luther's experience was that we can only be saved by God through our faithful relationship with God and Jesus. The sale of indulgences flew in the face of Luther's grace-filled experience so he sat down and began writing a letter to his superiors in protest of abuses in the indulgences system that would become the *"Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences,"* also known as the 95 Theses.

This man who had previously clung to the rule of the Church, and who had tried to disappear into a monastery never to be heard from again had been listening to God. By God's grace alone he had been pulled through to the other side of a fear that had threatened to consume him. And now this same person was prepared to challenge the institution that he had previously hidden himself inside.

This spring in Jerusalem in my work as an ecumenical accompanier for the World Council of Churches I learned a little bit about what that is like. I felt what it was like to rise above the fear in my stomach and engage in dissent inspired by the Gospel – dissent that comes down on the side of the last, the least, and the lost and challenges the world to do better.

Every Friday morning my friends and I stood in a wealthy West Jerusalem neighborhood with "Women in Black", a group that protests the conditions of those residing in refugee camps, increased housing demolitions and the walls of separation which affect workers and families so negatively. It was a silent protest, which meant we were not allowed to respond to anything which was said to us. My friends and I were yelled at, pushed, ridiculed, spit upon, flipped off and verbally threatened, every week.

On my final time going to "Women in Black", the intersection on which we usually stood was surrounded with young male counter protestors. I was as scared as I have ever been, and I almost turned around and went back to our apartment. Instead I picked up a sign, walked through the hate-filled crowd and stood in the line with the others. That's when I felt myself slipping from fear into a place of Grace. In this act of showing up for the Gospel message of love and justice for everybody, my soul felt like an emptied vessel being filling up with love for other people – and my fear melted away.

I'm not telling you that you need to go out and put yourself in such a vulnerable place to be a good Christian. But I do feel compelled to remind you that our Christian tradition from Jesus to Martin Luther to Archbishop Romero to Martin Luther King Jr. and millions of countless others is a tradition that is not afraid of dissenting with the powers of this world.

Our faith experience is that there is God's Grace abundant within the struggle for justice and love for ourselves and our neighbors.

What would have happened to Bartimaeus if he had remained silent? When he cried out, they tried to silence him. Bartimaeus was probably wary of the cruelty of the crowd, I don't doubt the blind beggar had known the scorn of the community before. But the Blind Man stood in the way and he cried all the louder, proclaiming the truth of the gospel message by demonstrating that the last will be first. And in doing so, Bartimaeus named Jesus for who he truly was – Son of David.

What are the things that are fundamental to your faith? What's the gospel? What do you believe, and why do you believe it? Those were the questions at the root of the reformers lives; and they're the same ones Christians around the world ask every day. I hope, in a moment, you'll have a chance to nail the start of your answer on our own very own Wittenburg door at our Reformation 500 party.

Luther's protest got him in embroiled in more controversy and conflict than he ever thought they would. He was rightfully afraid that he might be accused of heresy and burned at the stake. He was offered opportunities to retract, to repent, to reconcile, but still held firm on the foundation of his faith and conscience. He is famously remembered as saying at a trial in 1521 before Emperor Charles V, *"Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen."*

Amen, Martin Luther, Amen.