Sunday, October 30, 1983
LESSONS FROM LUTHER
Luke 18:9-14

One of the most exciting and most controversial figures in the history of the Christian church is a man who was born 500 years ago. His name is Martin Luther. He was born on November 10, 1483, at Eisleben, Germany.

Luther was many things — a priest, a student, a scholar, a pastor, an orator, a public figure. But above all, he was a man of faith and a theologian, and, like Jacob in the Old Testament, there is much that we can learn from his struggles and his life that is pertinent for us as human beings and as Christians.

What made Luther famous, almost overnight, were the so-called 95 theses of October 31, 1517, a series of propositions more formally known as “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.”

In Luther’s time, German gold had been going to Rome to pay for the rebuilding of St. Peter’s, and in return, Pope Leo X was sending indulgences for the remission of the pains of purgatory, an unfavorable balance of trade.

“Why does not the Pope... build this cathedral of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?” Luther asked in the 86th of his theses. “The real treasure of the church,” he declared in thesis 62, is not the institution with its wealth and power, but “the most Holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God.” And the grace od God was not for sale. It was a free gift.

For four years as a priest, the battle waged between Luther and the Roman Catholic Church. The combined forces of the Roman Catholic Church and the German-speaking states and northern Italy that made up the Holy Roman Empire threatened to denounce Luther as a heretic, to deny him the protection of civil law in this life and the solace of the sacraments for the life to come.

His friends and supporters urged him to be cautious, to find a way to compromise, not to go when he was summoned in 1521 to appear before the Emperor Charles V and the Imperial Diet at Worms. But Luther asserted that “if there were as many devils there as there were tiles on its rooftops,” he would still go.

At the meeting before the emperor and officials of the church, the demand was that he retract his errors. Instead, Luther declared: “It is neither safe nor honest to act against conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.” Here was the eternal struggle of the individual against the institution personified again in Luther.

How did Luther become the preeminent reformer of the Christian church? And what are some lessons for us from his life?

As a young man, he struggled like many young people of today to find himself and to determine what direction his life would take. His father wanted him to have a good education and perhaps become a lawyer. Thus, at the age of 17 he entered the University of Erfurt, Germany, and four years later received his master’s degree. But the struggle had just begun.

Even with his university degree, which very few young men obtained in that day, he was an unhappy young man. Then on a sultry day in July of 1505, as Martin Luther was walking and approached the outskirts of a Saxon village, the sky became overcast and there was a sudden thunderstorm. A bolt of lightning hit near him and knocked him to the ground. Struggling to rise, he cried out, “St. Anne, help me! I will become a monk!”

Luther entered the Augustinian Monastery shortly thereafter, to the dismay of his parents, especially his father. It is said that Martin’s mood before he became a monk had been headed downward because of his struggle to find direction in life. Now in the monastery, at least for a short time, he found some peace in the rigorous routine.

Taking the medieval religious system at its word, Luther tried as a faithful Augustinian monk to gain the assurance of the grace of God through the performance of the prescribed works of penance. But instead of giving him that assurance, his penitential exercised only intensified his sense of unworthiness. Moreover, whenever he did feel satisfied that he had finally done enough to gain God’s favor, he would hear an inner voice saying, “Well done, Brother Martin; soon you will not need God at all.”

Then it was that he found the doctrine which made him feel that he was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. God did not demand; God gave: The “righteousness of God” was not the justice by which God required of us sinners a performance in accordance with the absolute standards of God’s law; it was, rather, the free and unmerited gift by which God made us sinners acceptable so that all we needed to do was to accept our acceptance.

Although Luther’s initial religious experience in the thunderstorm was a rather traumatic one, and the celebration of his first mass as a priest had been equally an unusual and shattering emotional experience, this third religious crisis which resolved his inner turmoil was as the still, small voice compared to the other two.

The head of the Augustinian Order had assigned Luther to a teaching position as professor of bible. And so, he began a disciplined and regular study of the Bible. He began with the Psalms in the Old Testament because his first series of lectures was on that subject. Next, he began a thorough and systematic study of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, followed by St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians. These studies brought him to a totally ne understanding of the nature of God and of God’s grace. The solution to Luther’s problems came in the midst of the performance of the daily task. That’s a very important lesson from Luther.

He had come into a new view of Christ and anew view of God. God was a gracious and forgiving God, not an angry judge who all the time demanded more and more. It was not a new discovery, but rather a return to what the New Testament had always proclaimed.

After this rediscovery of the central meaning of the Christian faith, Luther then began to work on the implications of this doctrine.

One corollary of Luther’s recovery of the doctrine of Justification by Faith seems to be especially relevant today: his recognition that even after the forgiveness of sins and “justification by faith,” the sinner remains “righteous and a sinner at the same time.”

This is in contrast to much of the talk we hear today about “being saved.” Luther recognized the danger that is present with the most transforming moments of communion with God. We can come to believe that we are somehow better and more loved by God than others.

On the other hand, Luther also knew what you and I know, that many individuals may never have a deep emotional religious experience — an encounter with God or God’s Spirit which is so overwhelming that we know it was from that moment that our life was turned around. But this does not make us any less loved and accepted by God. There are many individuals who may never be able to identify the specific moment that they became Christians, but that does not make them any worse or any better than the individual who has a mind-shattering conversion experience.

A second corollary of the doctrine of “Justification by Faith” is what Luther called “the universal priesthood of believers” — which is to say that all believers have a direct relationship to God, and as such, we are all “priests” to one another. The fact that some individuals are ordained to the “priesthood” or as ministers does not give them any special place as far as God is concerned.

Too often since Luther’s time, Christians have tended to emphasize only the fact that each person can go to God directly in prayer as an example of the priesthood of all believers. But that’s only one part of what Luther was emphasizing. The other part is equally important: The fact that each one of us as priest has a responsibility for everyone else.

This doctrine of the priesthood of all believers led to another significant happening: the translation of the Bible into the various languages of the common people. Luther began this by personally translating the bible from its original languages of Hebrew and Greek into German. Heretofore, the Bible had been translated primarily into Latin.

But God does not speak only in one or two or three languages. If every believer was to understand the message of the Gospel and if every believer was to be able to evaluate the teaching and preaching of the church, then it followed that Holy Scripture was not to be the exclusive property of the learned or the ordained, but should be available to all, in his or her own language.

This meant it was also necessary to provide believers with forms of worship that spoke the language of the day, because language is always changing. In this light it is amusing to hear the cries of alarm that go up every time any Christian denomination attempts to remove archaic language from its liturgy and hymns, or any time a new and fresh translation of the Bible is made. Some still believe that God speaks only in King James English. I believe that one of the most important tasks to today, in addition to new translations of the Bible, is to write new words from hymns.

Monk, priest, professor of theology — that he certainly was — but Luther was at the same time also a man of this world, an individual who loved life and people.

At the age of 41, Luther married Katherine Von Bora, and together they had six children. They also raised 11 orphaned nieces and nephews. Regardless of what his detractors may make of it, this was not the same old story of a priest running off with a nun. It was, rather, the concrete and quite unromantic decision to carry into action a revolutionary conviction for that time: that sex and marriage were God’s good gift and creation and were no less holy and pure than virginity and celibacy.

The Middle Ages had called marriage one of the seven sacraments, but at the same time put up with it as a necessary evil and a poor second to monastic life. Thus, both Luther and his wife had been trained to regard their monastic vows as an entrée to a higher estate than marriage. They had also been taught to believe that any marriage in violation of those vows was a mortal sin.

Luther's marriage was also his recognition that the spiritual and mental aspects of life are no more noble than are the physical and material aspects of human life. Luther believed and taught that the family was the foundation of society.

Perhaps the most important lesson of all from Luther for us today is his belief in a transcendent, yet loving God. In all his agony and conflict, Luther never doubted the reality of the divine transcendence. In fact, that was the problem; if only God were an illusion, it would be so much easier! But for Luther, God was real - all too real - in judgment and law, in transcendent majesty, "a consuming fire."

At the same time, Luther believes that God is among us. In a Christmas sermon Luther said, "Do not try to comprehend the majesty of God, for that will drive you insane; come to Bethlehem and see the Eternal in the form of the infant in his mother's lap."

Like all of us, Luther had his flaws. There was a different in what he said he believed and what he many times did. We know that experience. Like the Apostle Paul who wrote inspired words that "in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free," yet in his own life had difficulty living out that reality, so also Luther did not live up to the gospel he preached. He fell back on his prejudices, his hatreds, and hit pettiness. Or, like Thomas Jefferson, who did not live up to the Declaration of Independence's lines about equality — he didn't include women and did not free his slaves, yet he provided years later a charter for equality — so also Luther was often a person of contradictions whose mixed legacy left some things worse.

Yet the lesson is that whenever the presence of God is felt and we are open to that presence, we can transcend our own prejudices and hatreds and make a difference for the good, in our own lives and in the lives of others. Amen.