Sunday, October 26, 1986
MARTIN LUTHER'S STORY
Luke 18:9-14

Some stories need to be told over and over again. That's what we do with the parables of Jesus like the one just read from Luke's Gospel about the two men going up to the temple to pray.

There are also stories of people's lives which need to be told over and over again. This is especially true of individuals whose contributions made significant changes in our common history. This morning, I want to retell the story of Martin Luther. He is one of the most exciting and most controversial figures in the history of the Christian Church. More importantly, much of his story of struggling to find a vital faith in God is also our story. And as we shall see, the parable read from Luke's Gospel earlier fits into his story and ours.

Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany. At the base of our bell tower, we have a stone which comes from the house in which he was born. Look at it sometime.

During his life, Luther was many things — a priest, a student, a pastor, an orator, and a widely known public figure. But above all, he was a person of faith and a theologian. More than anything else, he wanted to know that he was loved and accepted by God. Like Jacob in the Old Testament, he wrestled with God.

As with many people who become pivotal in our history, he was at the right place at the right time, and he seized the opportunity when it was available. You have heard me say before that in relation to the future, we human beings tend to fall into three groups — those who let the future happen, those who help make it happen, and those who wonder what happened. Martin Luther was in the second category. He helped make things happen.

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

Let me explain this rather complicated-sounding issue. In Luther's time, German gold had been going to Rome to help pay for the rebuilding of St. Peter's Cathedral, and in return, Pope Leo the 10th was sending indulgences for the remission of the pains of purgatory — an unfavorable balance of trade as far as Luther was concerned.

An indulgence was an edict from the Pope which shortened the stay in purgatory of an individual. The idea of an indulgence was based on two questionable assumptions: (1) that almost all people who die spend some time in purgatory as a place of cleansing, frequently painful, as a way of preparing them for being in the holy presence of God in heaven, and (2) that the Pope had the power to shorten this time.

Luther was especially upset with the idea that if money were paid into the Pope's treasury, the time in purgatory could be lessened. To quote Luther, "Why does not the Pope build his Cathedral of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?" This question is posed in the 86th of his theses. In thesis 62, Luther said, "The real treasure of the Church is not the institution with its wealth and power, but the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God." And the grace of God was not for sale. It is a free gift!

For four years as a priest, on these issues and others, 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.

Luther's friends and supporters urged him to be cautious, to find a way of compromise, not to go when he was summoned in 1521 to appear before Emperor Charles V. 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 the officials of the Church, the demand was made 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.

But let's back up a bit. How did Luther become the preeminent reformer of the Christian Church? What led him in his faith to take his stand?

As a young man, Luther struggled like many young people then and now 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 at 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 people 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 exercises 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 say, "Well done, Brother Martin, soon you will not need God at all."

Then it was that Luther found the answer which made him feel that he was altogether born anew 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. God loves you. You are accepted, and there's nothing you can do to earn that love and acceptance.

Although Luther's initial religious experience in the thunderstorm was rather traumatic, 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 new understanding of the nature of God and of God's grace. Here's the important point: The solution to Luther's problems came in the midst of the performance of the daily task, not through some external shattering religious experience. God is often to be found in our day-to-day routines.

He had come into a new view of Christ and a new view of God. God was a gracious, loving, 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 Jesus and 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 is especially relevant today — his recognition that even after the forgiveness of sins and acceptance by God, the sinner remains righteous and a sinner at the same time.

And this is exactly the point of the parable which Jesus told, as we read earlier in Luke's Gospel. One man in his prayers reminded God of what a righteous and saved person he was, but the other recognized that even though God accepted him and loved him, he was still a sinner.

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 or accepted by God. There are many individuals who may never be able to identify the exact moment that they came to know God, 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 all believers — which is to say that all human beings 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 priests has a responsibility to minister to each other.

Monk, priest, pastor, professor of theology and Bible, Luther was a man of many skills, and he was at the same time 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 celibacy and virginity.

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 poor second to monastic life. Thus, both Luther and his wife had been trained to regard their monastic vows as an entree 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 life. Luther furthermore believed and taught that the family was the foundation of society.

Perhaps the most important lesson of all from Luther's story for us today is his belief in a transcendent, yet immanent and loving God. He could and did experience the mystery and holiness of God as well as the loving tenderness. In a Christmas sermon, he 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, Martin Luther had his flaws. There was a difference in what he said he believed and what he many times did; we know that experience.

What saved Luther and what saves us is the good news that God is merciful and loving, and we especially come to experience and know God's mercy when we are humble. Jesus reminds us: "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Amen.