

“95 Theses for Today”

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Sermon on 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation
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Leviticus 4:22-31; 6:1-7
Habakkuk 2:4-5
Romans 1:16-17

Five-hundred years is a VERY long time. Half a millennium. Much has happened since October 31, 1517. The Mexican-Costa Rican Bible scholar, Elsa Tamez, sums it up like this: “The Bible and the Five Hundred Years of Conquest.”¹ During the last 500 years, many peoples and cultures underwent enormous violence and oppression that was not yet there in 1517, such as the colonial domination in the Americas. The United States as a country did not yet exist. No cars, no planes, no electricity. Just the printing press had made it into the western European area that nowadays is called Germany. The geographical maps we take for granted today did not yet exist. In fact, no democratic political structures existed at the time. It was the era of feudalism and monarchies. The Spanish empire dominated the European continent. About twenty-five years earlier, in 1492, Columbus had sailed to what he believed was India.... It was the beginning era of the European conquerors changing peoples’ lives and cultures, often destroying it, all over the world. The world-changing book by Nicolaus Copernicus entitled “On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres,” which was published just before his death in 1543, was not yet written and people still lived with the idea of the sun circling around the earth. They did not know anything of heliocentrism or the soon-emerging “Scientific Revolution” that would shape everything modern people consider to be true. At the time, most German peasants endured lives in “indentured servanthood”—they were slaves, a system that was abolished only in the early 19th

century with the success of Napoleon in Western Europe. In 1517, the US-slavery system was yet to come, and the tremendous survival qualities of endurance put upon the people of African descent in the USA were yet to develop. In 1517, paperback books did not exist, there were no public libraries, and nobody knew of automatic weapons, bombs, and drones. The Holocaust was yet to come and nobody had heard of concentration camps. The countless genocides of indigenous peoples worldwide had not yet taken place, and Christian missionaries had yet to convert, often by force, peoples of other religious traditions and practices everywhere. There was no water coming into everybody's home; there were no fridges, no ACs, no US-American constitution, no credit cards, and no nuclear bombs.

But with all the historically, technologically, politically, economically, socially, and religiously major differences between then and now, I suggest to you this morning that there are also some significant similarities. And because of these similarities, I will invite us in a minute to come up with our 95 theses for today, just as Martin Luther posted his 95 theses to the door of the Schlosskirche of Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.

Here is what was going on in the early 16th century in what we call Germany today that reminds me of our time.

The Reformation was the result of the crisis of feudalism and the response to a deep structural change within the medieval society, which began at the end of the 14th century and developed into new societal structures in the 16th century. The emergence of the money-product relationship, the medieval agricultural crisis, which the disastrous plague of the 14th century and its demographic consequences aggravated, as well as the slow but constant rise of new social forces unsettled the medieval social order in ways never seen before. The rising bourgeoisie and the new rising princes of the regions with their particular interests and ways of life gained political and social significance. Early forms of capitalism, initiated by the rising bourgeoisie and the newly defined political territorial powers, the new confidence in the newly emerging social class of the bourgeoisie and the emerging considerations about political power changed feudal and individual life within the medieval order. The changes challenged the dominant views about society, rulership, and religion.... [People were aware that they lived in] a time of change, of institutional crises, and of intense expectations for salvation.... People were not satisfied by the

feudalistically organized church anymore that was unable to offer spiritual orientation, and so people loved ideas about the end times, looked for prophets, and had an increasing desire for grace, justification, and salvation. The latter was giving rise to new forms of spirituality, such as indulgences and pilgrimages.... People experienced in increasingly serious ways the discrepancy between the rule of the empire and the church on the one hand and the traditionally taught notions about political rule of justice and ecclesial Christian life on the other hand. They felt deeply the tensions between the exploitative financial practices of the church promising salvation on the one hand and the unfulfilled desire for salvations among the people. The experienced uncertainties turned into increasingly more serious criticism about the social-political conditions in which people lived, and more and more voices articulated the need for reform. ... Thus the late-medieval era...was haunted by a series of crises and conflicts...in the social-economic, ecclesial-religious, and political realms, and all of them indicated in various ways the depth of the crisis in which feudalism found itself.²

In short, Luther's era was a time of crisis in which many people recognized that much was socially, politically, and religiously wrong. Does this not sound familiar? In our own time, the economic system known as neoliberalism is swallowing up all the historically grown institutions in our society. Our democratic system is in relative chaos. There are voices saying that our democratic system is waning. Just this week, the New York Times reported that in Ohio voters who did not vote in the previous election were being purged from the voter registration system in Ohio; the Supreme Court will hear the case on November 8, and the complainant observes that "the right to vote is the most important right you have. If you can't vote, you really don't have a democratic system."³ Then there is the so-called financialization of the economic system in which it does not matter what you produce but rather how good you are at speculating with money and collecting fees and interests. In 2014, 45 million US-Americans lived "officially" in poverty,⁴ and in 2015, the number hovered around 43.1 million Americans, about 13.5% of the population according to the US Census Bureau.⁵ And that's the official number, which means that an even larger number of Americans live in extremely precarious financial situations. Worldwide, nearly half of the world's population, that is more than 3 billion people, live on less than \$2.50 a day. More than 1.3 billion live in extreme poverty — less than \$1.25 a

day.⁶ Then there are our cultural-social institutions. The public school system goes through major challenges on various levels; cultural institutions such as public libraries, community centers, theaters, and public spaces do not receive the support they once received. The ambivalence toward religious organizations, such as churches, are talked about everywhere, and the inherited infrastructures and authority structures are questioned, criticized, and no longer taken for granted. Our intellectual priorities are also in flux. Should we support the increasing cooperation between the private and public realm, accept grants from the military-industrial complex to fund research at universities and institutions of higher learning? What about those fields that do not promise financial gain and fame? The situation is indeed grim. Like at the beginning of the 16th century, in our time too all of our inherited traditions, institutions, and ways of life are critiqued, changing, sometimes even in the process of disappearing. We wonder what it will be in the future. This sense of uncertainty in the way life worked so far and not knowing what will be, that was also going on in Luther's days 500 years ago. The modern worldview and way of life that was being born in 1517 is challenged nowadays in similar ways to the medieval worldview and way of life at time of the Protestant Reformation, 500 years ago.

Luther's response to his era's challenges was complex. First, he tried to become a perfect monk. While he read his Bible, he realized his theological error. Then he exposed a major political-economic-religious abuse of his time, namely the selling of indulgences, in his 95 theses posted on October 31, 1517. His critique targeted the very abuse that was sponsored by the central religious authority of his day: the pope. Luther made a bold move. Listen how bold he was:

He said famously in his 27th thesis:

They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.

And in thesis number 66:

The treasures of indulgences are nets with which one now fishes for the wealth of men.

Or number 75:

To consider papal indulgences so great that they could absolve a man (i.e. human) even if he had done the impossible and had violated the mother of God is madness.

And number 81:

This unbridled preaching of indulgences makes it difficult even for learned men to rescue the reverence which is due the pope from slander or from the shrewd questions of the laity.

And finally, in thesis number 86:

Again, “Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?”

His courageous and clear-cut criticism of the political-religious authorities of his day led to some difficulties for Martin Luther. Yet he was not afraid because theologically he knew what he was doing. He had discovered that God’s saving grace did not depend on human-made indulgences because “God’s righteousness is revealed through faith by faith (Rom. 1:17). He grounded his critique about the sale of indulgences in his reading of the Bible and not in his intellectual-theological-political submission to the key authority of his era, the Church.

For Luther, the righteousness of God, that famous genitive puzzle, “is the cause of salvation.” He explains the meaning of God’s righteousness in his commentary on the Letter to the Romans like this: “And here again, by the righteousness of God we must not understand the righteousness by which He [*sic*] is righteous in Himself [*sic*] but the righteousness by which we are made by God. This happens through faith in the Gospel.”⁷ *Sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura.* Or as Luther writes when he talks about Romans 3:26: “God is called righteous by the

apostle because He [*sic*] justifies or makes us righteous, as has been said above. And thus it is also evident from the apostle, who interprets himself, that ‘righteousness of God’ (v. 21) is a term which describes that by which He [*sic*] makes us righteous, just as the wisdom of God is that by which He [*sic*] makes us wise.”⁸

Trust me, I have much to say about the צדקה and δικαιοσύνη; these are foundational and crucial words in Christian theological vocabulary, and much has been written about them. Much. Check out the commentaries by Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann, and all the other great New Testament scholars and theologians. Everybody had lots to say about these words in Romans 1:16-17, the central verses in Protestant theological thought.

But I need to move on because I want us as a congregation to think about the 95 theses for today. What is our theological critique of our current political, social, economic, religious systems and how do we argue our criticism theologically? This question is a little tricky because in difference to Martin Luther and his contemporaries, we do no longer take for granted the unity of secular and religious powers in the world. That was one of the major accomplishments of the modern epistemology. It segregated (and I use this verb intentionally) the secular and the sacred. As a result, religious life is now marginalized and disempowered, which is what religious fundamentalists of all stripes and convictions are trying to change “back” again. But the religious-fundamentalist move cannot be ours, as it is a reactionary move and thus politically dangerous. So as modern or, rather, as post-postmodern Christian Protestants, how do we follow Martin Luther’s lineage in developing our own formulations of the 95 theses for today? That’s my question to you. There is no right or wrong answer but only your thoughtful response.

Please take an index card and a pen and write down what your critique is; then turn to your friendly fellow human next to you, and for a brief moment share with each other your

thesis. Once we will have done this brief exchange, I will invite everybody to get up and post our theses at the outside church door of Perkins Chapel. Scotch tape will be provided. So please start with writing down your thesis answering this question: “What is your theological critique of our current political, social, economic, religious systems and how do you argue your criticism theologically?” So let’s go and boldly launch the reformation for the next 500 years!

¹ Elsa Tamez, “The Bible and the Five Hundred Years of Conquest,” in *Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (3rd rev. and exp. ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press), 13-26.

² Richard van Dülmen, *Reformation als Revolution: Soziale Bewegung und religiöser Radikalismus in der deutschen Reformation* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1977), 9-10. My translation from the original German.

³ Adam Liptak, “Some Years, He didn’t Vote; Then They Told Him He Couldn’t,” *New York Times* (October 24, 2017): A17.

⁴ Mark Gongloff, “45 Million Americans Still Stuck Below Poverty Line: Census,” *Huffington Post* (October, 16, 2014); available at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/16/poverty-household-income_n_5828974.html.

⁵ The poverty threshold for a family of four is \$24,000 in 2015; for an individual it was \$12,000 and for two people it was \$15,000. For more information, see <https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/faq/what-current-poverty-rate-united-states>.

⁶ <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-global-poverty>

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Volume 25: Lectures on Romans*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis, LA: MS Publishing House, 1972), 151.

⁸ *Ibid*, 249.