

30th Sunday Ordinary Time
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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He was, in some ways, a tortured soul. He was, in some ways, an insightful man. Like all of us, he was a person of his time, caught up in forces bigger than himself.

And, 500 years ago this week, he did something that forever changed the face of Christianity.

His name was Martin Luther.

Why did I say that he was a tortured soul? Well, Luther – like most Europeans at that time - was raised in a Catholic home. He heard the preaching that was common at the time. He loved the church, but also noticed things in the church that disappointed him.

Above all, he wanted to fulfill the commandment we heard in today's Gospel reading. He wanted to love God with all of his heart, soul and mind, and he wanted to love his neighbor as himself.

And because he wanted to love God with every fiber of his being, he became a priest in the Augustinian friars. He studied theology, fell in love with Scripture, celebrated the Eucharist, and ministered to those in need.

But, Father Luther was painfully aware that he was a sinner. He was aware that, despite his best efforts, he couldn't do all of the good things he wanted to do.

Like many of us, Luther woke up in the morning and said to himself, "Today. I will love God more, and I'll be nicer to people." And by lunch time he was wondering why he kept doing the bad things he didn't want to do.

This is part of what tortured Luther. He WANTED to love God completely. He WANTED to love his neighbor. But there were parts of him that were sinful. And he struggled, because much of the popular Catholic preaching and piety at that time gave many people the impression that it was *up to us* to become WORTHY of God's love.

Catholic devotional practices of that era gave the impression that God's love and mercy could be OBTAINED – just go to confession, and God will be forced to forgive you! Just buy an indulgence – God will be forced to forgive the sins of those who have died! Just do enough good works – and God will finally say to you, "You are worthy of my love!"

Now, these things were never the official teaching of our church. But Luther, and so many Catholics 500 years ago, had heard enough bad homilies, and this unfortunate impression sank in.

Then, Luther studied Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. In Romans, Paul keeps saying that we are not saved or 'made worthy' by the things that *we* do. Rather, salvation is a free gift from the God who *already loves us*.

As he read this, Luther started to rejoice. 'I don't have to earn God's love! God already loves me! I do not have to earn forgiveness – God already forgave me, when he sent his son Jesus into the world. God loves me just because God made me, and I am able to love God and love my neighbor BECAUSE God has loved me!'

God loves, we *respond*.

Now, Luther did not have a Facebook page where he could share these insights. Instead, he wrote his ideas down and tacked them onto the church door, to let other people know what he was thinking.

Luther articulated some great scriptural insight. But he also contradicted things that are crucial to the Catholic understanding of Christ's message.

A theological debate ensued. And, sadly, that debate got caught up in other factors, including political division in Europe. Catholic leaders objected to some of Luther's writings. Luther became more critical of the church. Emotions raged. Sadly, the church divided – the Protestant reformation was born.

It all started 500 years ago this week.

500 years later, the Protestant Churches have entered into ecumenical dialog with the Catholic Church. Lutherans have evolved – so have we. (Rome won't let me sell indulgences in order to pay off the mortgage!) We now recognize that what unites us is greater than the theological points that divide us.

I pray that Christ's church will be united, because Christians have a message that the whole world needs to hear.

Today's Gospel calls us to love God with all our heart, mind and soul. Today's Gospel calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But many people are still tortured by the questions that lurked in the heart Martin Luther. Questions like:

- + am I worthy of God's love? Or do I have to earn Gods love?
- + why is it that I WANT to love God wholeheartedly, but I feel so divided, unable to do what's right?

- + I want to love God and my neighbor consistently – so why is it that I keep giving my heart to things that are not good for me?
- + why can't I be good? Why do I pass judgment on people? Why am I so angry?
- + am I loveable?

Have you ever asked yourself any of those questions?

If so, rejoice today. Rejoice in the answer that Saint Paul provided 2000 years ago. Rejoice in what St. Paul told us in the Letter to the Romans.

You don't have to work tirelessly to *earn* love. God has already given you more love than you can hold. Because that's how good God is.

You don't have to do lots of good things to attract God's attention. God has his eye on you all the time – even when you take your eye off him.

God knows that every human being sins. So God sent his Son, to tell us the truth and to demonstrate God's ability to forgive everything and change every one of us.

Your love for God is a *response* to the gift God has given to you.

Your ability to love your neighbor is possible because God has loved you *first*. God loves you – therefore you can love someone else.

And this is precisely the truth echoed in today's first reading. The people of Israel were facing an eerily contemporary question: 'How should we treat aliens and immigrants? How should we respond to orphans? Do we have a responsibility to those who are thrown to the side of society?'

God says to ancient Israel – 'you *must* take care of aliens and foreigners.' Why? *Because you yourselves were once aliens in Egypt.* At one point, the people of Israel were *the strangers in a strange land*. God says, *you* were the ones who were cast aside, enslaved and rejected.

'But I, the Lord, did not ignore you. I paid attention to your suffering. I loved you, and led you out of Egypt. I set you free.'

God says to all of us, "You **MUST** notice of the outcasts – because I noticed you when you were outcast. You **MUST** welcome the stranger into your midst – because when you were a stranger, I was with you. And you must serve your suffering neighbors, because I love and protect you when you're suffering.'

God calls us to *do for others* what the Lord *first does for us*.

I'm not sure how we can call ourselves "God's faithful people" if we ignore today's first reading.

In the Book of Exodus, God insists that people of faith *must* open their hearts to those who are strangers and aliens.

That kind of faithfulness is hard, isn't it? Trying to do all that God asks is hard. But don't be tortured by how you fail. Focus rather on what God has already done for you, even though we don't earn it.

Focus on our gracious God, the One who loves us before we even know what love is. Focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, who died and rose for you, not because you deserve it, but because God knew that the only way we could love the Lord and love each other was if He loved us first.

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