

ACCESSIBLE FAITH

**A Reformation Sunday Sermon on 1 Thess. 2:1-8—Rev. Adam E Eckhart
October 29, 2017—The First United Church of Christ (Cong.), Milford, CT**

1.

I've never been physically disabled, but after a decade of stroller duty, I appreciate building accessibility. Getting from point A to point B is so frustrating when there's only stairs and you can't use them! At least I could sometimes carry the stroller with our infant up or down the stairs.

Our church recently asked for feedback related to accessibility. There's many forms of accessibility beyond physical—vision and hearing impairment for instance—that we hope to take more into account to improve our accessibility. We've done it before. A decade ago we built a ramp into the front exterior stairs to the Sanctuary for people with strollers, walkers, canes and wheelchairs: making church more accessible.

2.

The Protestant Reformation, which began 500 years ago, made God & the Bible more accessible.

Leading up to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic church had built itself up by making God inaccessible without it. It had become the gatekeepers to the ramp between God and God's people. Around 300 AD the Christian church had become the western world's sponsored religion, and for much of the 1200 years leading up to the Reformation, had developed a hierarchy centered on Rome. The cosmic system of the Medieval Catholic church included heaven, hell, and purgatory, where souls destined for heaven waited for purification. The church said: 'Confess your sins to priests who will absolve you of guilt so that you don't end up in purgatory of hell.'

The church also controlled worship and the Bible. The Bible, originally written in Hebrew and Greek, had been translated exclusively into Latin, a long-dead language. No family sat around the dinner table using Latin—only clergy, lawyers and royals used it. The few who dared translate the Bible into

their native language, like Jan Hus, were usually executed. Not that there was much point in translating the Bible: literacy levels were low. So the mass was recited mostly in Latin; only the sermon was given in the local language; the people had to rely on what the priests said was the Bible's interpretation. Gatekeepers for the ramp to God.

People often resented the church and its priests but had little recourse...until the printing press was developed in the mid-15th century, enabling printers to mass produce writings and slowly increase the literacy rate. It was only a matter of time before the press would cause upheaval.

3.

Then comes Martin Luther¹. Luther is born in rural, southeastern Germany in 1483. As a young man Luther decides that he will become a priest. Luther is brilliant but spiritually troubled by the vast chasm that he experiences between humans and God. As a monk in training, his long confessions tire out the priests. Luther fears that not confessing any one sin could jeopardize his eternal fate.

One year, he joyfully travels to Rome to represent his monastery, hoping to rack up purgatory reduction points by visiting the relics of saints and other sacred places. But Luther is disappointed. He visits the Scala Santa, the staircase transported from Jerusalem to Rome, supposedly belonging to Pontius Pilate, that people could say the Lord's Prayer on each of its 28 steps to free loved ones from purgatory. When Luther gets to the top of the stairs, he reportedly says, "Who knows if this really works?" In other words, Does doing this bridge the chasm between us and God?

Luther's mentor wants him to put his intelligence to good use so he recommends him to become the Bible professor in the town of Wittenberg. Luther's first lectures, given in Latin, are on the Psalms. He gets to Psalm 22, the words that Jesus says on the

cross in Mark's Gospel: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and Luther realizes that Christ experiences alienation from God, too, on the cross—he's just like me! But then through the Easter event God reconciles people and God; the chasm is bridged, and Christ is the ramp.

Next, Luther gets to lecture on Paul's letter to the Romans. He reads there that "righteousness from God comes through faith" [Rom. 3:22a] and that God was good with Abraham [and Sarah] before they did anything God commanded, because they had faith in God [4:13-16].

God is accessible by faith alone, Luther realizes, not through a vast system of confession and absolution imposed by the church. No gatekeeper required!

Now at first, Luther just mentions this in a lecture. But then an indulgence preacher came to the region. People who gave to their local parish for the renovation effort at St. Peter's Basilica could get an indulgence certificate saying their own or a loved one's time in purgatory was greatly reduced. The indulgence preacher supposedly tells people: "As soon as the gold in the coffer rings, The rescued soul to heaven springs!"

Luther hears about this sermon and goes ballistic. He writes 95 points, or theses, about how inappropriate the church's indulgence system is and how corrupt Rome has become, writing things like, "'What is this new piety of God and the pope, that for money they allow a man who is impious and their enemy to buy out of purgatory the pious soul of a friend of God?" If the Pope has the power to liberate people from purgatory, why do it for money and not out of love?"ⁱⁱ

Luther writes the 95 Theses in Latin at first, and [perhaps] posts them on the Wittenberg church door—which was like the community message board or internet—for his students to read on October 31, 1517. Somebody sends the 95 theses to Rome. Things escalate. Rome gets upset over the critique, Luther's friends print copies of the

Theses in German and distribute them to anybody who can read. Luther writes several other pamphlets and books to defend his hopes for the church to be reformed, which are vastly popular among the peasantry.

The Holy Roman Emperor drags Luther into a church proceeding to recant his writings, at which point Luther says, "Here I stand. (I'm not changing)." The church attempts to arrest Luther but his friends grab him first and hide him while he starts to translate the Bible into German. Some of the peasants who have suffered under the feudal system use the upheaval to trash statues in churches (they the statues of saints are idolatry) and to revolt against the landowners, so Luther comes out of hiding to calm them down. Luther translates the Mass into German and some princes turn their Catholic churches into Lutheran ones. Luther, no longer a monk, marries a former nun, Katerina von Bora, and they have six kids. They apparently don't mind giving up celibacy!

By then, and with similar efforts by others, the Catholic church loses its hold on the keys to the kingdom that were never fully theirs to begin with. As Paul writes, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 12). Because of the Reformation, people start to read the Bible in their own language and learn to read by reading the Bible.

Because of the Reformation, people rediscover the foundational Christian theology that God, like the prodigal son's father, stands with open arms of love, embrace us with accessible love when we are simply willing to receive God's loving arms in faith. Because of the Reformation, Protestants practice direct prayer and confession to God. No more mediation, now a direct track to God.

4.

Luther was far from perfect, especially by our standards today. Yet he helped turn a corrupt, transaction-centered religion back into a

transformational faith. He restored the church to a community building ramps to God.

The Catholic church has changed a lot since the Reformation began, as have Protestant churches. For instance, our Congregational tradition was born out of an ongoing Reformation movement when a group of literate Christians fled England to the New World to practice Christian religion according to their consciences.

Today we stand in the ripples of the Reformation. We can read the Bible and experience our relationship with God independent of a hierarchical church system. But we live in an age where God's call to communal identity and to individual conscience work in great tension with each other, and some people think that they can practice religion apart from community.

The church, while no longer looking like a unique gatekeeper to God, is still invaluable to faith and community. This is the time for the church to re-assess itself in light of accessibility: not just physical accessibility, although that's important, but accessibility for the many who genuinely hunger and thirst for a relationship with God.

My question on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is: How do we renew our commitment to making God's love accessible to people who yearn for it? How do we share the Good News of Christ, of the crucifixion and the resurrection?

5.

Today's scripture reading gives us a couple hints. Paul faced substantial resistance from most people in the city of Thessalonica because the Greco-Roman Empire conditioned people to be skeptical of 1) new religions and 2) religions that were exclusive, meaning that they didn't permit you to worship other gods or the Emperor. The Jesus movement was both seemingly new (yet old) and

certainly did not allow members to worship other gods or the Emperor. But what the Christian faith had going for it was undying commitment to God's unifying love. It was an undying commitment: no level of persecution stopped folks like Paul, Silas, Timothy, or Phoebe, from spreading the message of Jesus. And it was a commitment to God's unifying love: Christianity sees everybody as part of God's one creation, members of one human family. In today's reading Paul refers to the Thessalonian church as sisters and brothers because through God's love for all people in Jesus Christ, that's what they are. Paul says he isn't in it for the money; he has shared not only the Good News but also himself fully with them. He loves them. This shared love elevates them higher and closer to God than any stairs or ramp ever could. And so the church thrives despite great prejudice against it.

To be accessible in faith today means to love God with all our hearts and to let that love define our love for each other as God's children. To be accessible in faith means to be justified by faith, to believe in our hearts and our guts that God cares about our faith and love and other people's faith and love and not about how perfect or successful we are. When we live into God's gift of love and faith, not everybody will know we are Christians because they don't all know what it means to be a Christian, but they WILL know that this is a community that draws them in by love and faith; the faith in God may come later.

The Reformation spread largely because its first leaders clearly loved God's people more than the church of the day appeared to. So thanks Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the rest! Happy 500th birthday, Reformation! Thanks for passing along accessibility to God and Bible, and genuine love. May we use those gifts to build open, grace-filled ramps for generations to come. Amen.

ⁱ The following is based largely on Bainton, Roland. 1955. *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. 1955. New York: Signet Books.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/ninetyfive.html>