

PROTESTANT REFORMATION

The Protestant Reformation is about life and death and more importantly—life after death.

How do you get to heaven? Nowadays our concept of heaven is pretty much confined to jokes. The question “How do you get to heaven?” has become a set up like, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” Practice, practice, practice.

1. I heard Billy Graham tell this joke once: “A fellow died and found himself at the pearly gates before St. Peter. St. Peter said to him, ‘You know we go on the point system here. Just tell me about your life and if you get a million points you can enter heaven.’ So the fellow says, ‘I always went to church from the time I was born until the day I died.’ St. Peter says, ‘Well that’s great because heaven is a lot like church and church people seem to adjust better to heaven and I’m really pleased about your participation in church and that’s worth one point.’ So the guy starts sweating a little and he says, ‘I never drank nor smoked my whole life long.’ And St. Peter says, ‘That’s great because we have no tobacco nor alcohol here in heaven and that’s worth one point.’ Then the guy is really worried and he starts reciting all the other good things he did in his life: generous pledge to the stewardship campaign, voted against Proposition 8, supported the Great Park, good family values, fair business practices etc. etc.; but each of these good characteristics brings only one point. Finally in frustration, he says, ‘No one can get in here without the virtue of Jesus Christ himself!’ Then St. Peter says, ‘Oh, you know Jesus? Well then come on in old friend, welcome home.’”

2.OK Here's a better one. Did you hear the one about Zeke coming late to church and falling asleep in the front row? The preacher sees him there snoring and decides to give him a hard time so he says, "Every one who wants to go to heaven stand up and shout!" Everyone but Zeke stands up and shouts and the commotion wakes up ol' Zeke. The preacher says, "Zeke, I told everyone who wants to go to heaven to stand up and shout, don't you want to go to heaven?" Zeke says, "Well sure I do Reverend; but I thought you was getting up a group to go right now."

Prior to October 31, 1517 Christians had a clear understanding of how to get to heaven. Certainly many Christians have a clear idea to this very day about how to get to heaven; but on that day Martin Luther raised some questions in a revolutionary way. Ever since then, Christians have to confront the issues raised by the Protestant Reformation—there have been an enormous variety of answers, but once the questions began to arise, Christianity has evolved in response to those questions. Even those who have maintained loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church and the answers the Church gave prior to 1517 have had to justify their rejection of Reformation. There have been heretics before and since who challenged Roman Catholic Orthodoxy, and Luther himself felt that the Reformation was inevitable with or without his 95 theses. But we have a convenient date and mythology to identify the origins of our Protestant tradition. (Some scholars dispute the accuracy of the myth, but you can picture the angry monk approaching the door of the chapel at Wittenberg University with a hammer and nails and a sheaf of paper. Defiantly he nailed the paper to the door. On All Hallows Eve, Halloween, 1517 he dared the representatives of the Roman Catholic Church to answer 95 Statements that he was prepared to debate.) That's why we celebrate Reformation Sunday on the first Sunday of November.

Luther objected to injustice. He didn't necessarily intend to begin a revolution; but he was angry about injustice. He demanded change. Wealthy institutional power oppressed individuals. The Church controlled the answer to the question, "How do you get to heaven?" and the Church leaders had used that control to acquire wealth and power. The blessings of the Church—especially through celebration of the sacraments—was the only way to attain eternal life and avoid eternal damnation. Much of the Church hierarchy had become cynical about those sacraments and used the power to bestow and withhold blessings to enhance their power and wealth.

Here is a paraphrase of correspondence between Albert of Hohenzollern and Pope Leo X in about 1517: "So Al—you want to be the Archbishop of Mainz? Tell you what I'm gonna do. You pay me 12,000 ducats—a thousand for each of the 12 apostles—and I'll see that you get the job."

"Leo, baby, that's a lot of ducats. How about if I pay you 7,000 ducats—a thousand for each of the 7 deadly sins—and I'll take the job?"

They reached a compromise and Albert paid ten thousand—one for each of the 10 commandments.

The injustice that Luther most objected to was the sale of indulgences. An indulgence was sort of like a credit default swap—it was a complex derivative financial instrument—in the event that you or your loved one didn't fully perform the obligations of your contract with God, the indulgence would pay off the debt from the surplus of grace that had accumulated in the Spiritual treasury of the Church from the lives of Christ, and all the faithful saints and martyrs. (Yeah well, credit default swaps don't make much sense to me either.) Anyway, it was a sort of "Get out of Purgatory Free" card and the salesmen

promoted the deal with this catchy little jingle, “As soon as pennies in the money chest ring, the souls out of their Purgatory do spring.” (It isn’t really that memorable in English is it?)

It was a lot like selling cars, part of the sales price went to the sales commission, part went to the local ecclesiastical taxing authority and part went back to help pay for construction of St. Peter’s Church in Rome. Paying for the Church was a “good work” that earned one favor from the Church and by extension from God.

By attacking indulgences, Luther attacked the financial, theological, political and spiritual authority of the Church. Naturally they excommunicated him—deprived him of communion—so that he could not do the sacramental work necessary to get to heaven and sentenced him instead to eternal damnation.

Luther established the Protestant Reformation on the basis of four little words: “Justification By Faith Alone.”

In those days everyone knew what happened in the afterlife. Everyone knew that a great line of dead souls waited their turn to be judged before entering the gates of heaven or falling into the pit of hell for the rest of eternity. The Church offered to serve as Public Defender for the faithful and get their sentences reduced to time served so those faithful souls could enter into the bliss of heaven. Luther brought out these verses from Romans and pointed to them to say that Christ Jesus will intercede for the accused. The outcome of the trial is pre-determined. If you have faith, no one will bring charges against you and no one will hand down a judgment against you in that heavenly court. You will certainly go to heaven, if you have faith.

A few years later in 1533 another angry young man, John Calvin, also chose All Saints Day to proclaim his objections to the Church and his commitment to Luther's four little words "Justification By Faith Alone." Calvin led his Protestantism into much different territory from Luther as he founded the "Reformed Church" and took over the city of Geneva, Switzerland as a place to establish a sort of civic theocracy under the guidelines of his "Institutes of the Christian Religion." He especially liked the verses from today's text that affirm the ideas of "predestination" and "God's elect."

Personally, I prefer Calvin to Luther, but neither of them was a particularly likable fellow. Both were egotistical, self-righteous, arrogant types. I suppose they had good days and bad days like everyone else. Both of them wrote down way too much of what they thought. I'm sure they each had friends who thought highly of them and enemies who despised them.

They bring us an interesting challenge. We are quite comfortable with the part of the great commandment that tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves. In this congregation we are thoroughly dedicated to seeking justice and bringing greater compassion into the world. **BUT THESE ARE JUST GOOD WORKS!** Valuable, good works, important good works, but ultimately just...good works. They are worth one point. They do not completely fulfill our Protestant heritage "Justification By Faith Alone." We know that our good works are the result of our faith and our belief in the other part of the great commandment: "Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

In the last 500 years or so we have gone way past the issues of the Protestant Reformation. We work out the tension between faith and works in a new way—encouraging one another in our works and in our faiths.

Perhaps it is because we do not have the same views of life and death and life after death that were common in the 16th Century.

For us life and death have to do with electro-chemical processes in the brain. When we stop perception by those electro-chemical processes is there any residual SELF that somehow persists after life ends, or is death more like the final episode of The Soprano's—nothing more than a sudden.....soundless.....blank screen?

Unlike our sisters and brothers of the Reformation era we wrestle with these issues as open questions rather than objective data. So for us, neither faith nor works can have the same goal as they held for the original Reformers. We just don't think of hope for heaven and fear of hell with the same urgency as they did. We think of ourselves as liberated from spiritual superstitions. But I commend to you a recent article in Newsweek about the neurobiology of "beliefs." Here's a sample: College professor holds up a sweater and offers students \$20 to wear the sweater—everyone has a hand up to take the \$20, then the professor says the sweater was worn by a notorious serial killer. Now who wants to wear the sweater? Something in our brains recoils at the association with evil that somehow resides in that common sweater. Superstition? Belief in the supernatural? For my part, I always say, "I'm not sure there really is a devil; but someone is doing the work."

This passage from Romans has some of the most important phrases for me: Nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Neither death, nor life, nor angels nor rulers nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation."

This is the hope I have to share. God's power to love us is greater than anyone's power to resist. This is the Grace that allows me to affirm that whatever awaits beyond life, when the electro-chemical processes in my brain stop, I will trust to the God who has shown me such a beautiful creation in this moment of time that I perceive as my life.

Luther and Calvin took a new look at the Sacraments. We do hold onto their Reformation idea of understanding the Communion as a symbolic rather than a real presence of Jesus. They put out the idea that you don't need a priest and a Church to tell you what to believe and what the Bible says and to administer the sacraments properly so you can go to heaven. They encouraged the use of that new technology of the printing press to put the Scripture into the hands of the people so each of us can read it and understand it for ourselves. They established a new church tradition as a place to share rituals with other believers for mutual edification and for combining efforts with other believers for discerning and accomplishing God's will.

So we gather on this Reformation Sunday, to honor the memory of those daring Reformers, to appreciate their role in establishing a tradition that allows us here at Irvine UCC to share the communion ritual with other believers. And to encourage one another in the struggle to do God's will in a world that shares so little of what we believe and hold sacred.

Will you pray with me?