

Sunday, October 30, 2011
Orinda Community Church UCC
A Sermon by the Rev. Frank Baldwin

YOUR GIFT STILL COUNTS

Romans 1:1-17

I. Five hundred and twenty-eight years ago this fall, late the evening of November 10th, in the town of Eisleben at the foot of the Harz Mountains in what is now the German state of Saxony-Anhalt, Margarethe and Hans Luther rejoiced together in the birth of their first child, a son. He was baptized the next day in the church around the corner and christened Martin, after Saint Martin of Tours, whose feast day it happened to be.

Martin Luther grew up bright, musical, inquisitive and intensely religious. He was given that most precious of gifts in late-medieval society: an education. His parents had hoped for a lawyer, but to no one's surprise Martin wound up a priest and a scholar. Resplendently full of life, young Brother Luther was known as a first-class thinker, a never-give-an-inch debater, a lover of good company (and good food), and a renowned storyteller and wit.

Priest and professor he might have always remained, had not Martin in his early thirties become grossly offended at the moral excesses of his era's dominant Roman Catholic culture. A breaking-point arose over the aggressive selling of so-called "indulgences" in his local parish. To raise money for its extravagant lifestyle and vast building projects – in particular the construction of the magnificent Basilica of St. Peter in Rome – the Church was promoting the idea that one could literally buy one's way one's way to redemption, if not into Heaven, at least out of Hell. In exchange for a contribution to the building fund, a German parishioner was granted forgiveness for a specified list of past sins; a rich parishioner could purchase a more expensive indulgence granting forgiveness for *future* sins (a sort of "Eternal Life" insurance policy). Luther's conscience could not stomach it.

On All Hallows Eve of the year 1517 Martin Luther issued his unprecedented demand for public debate on the matter of indulgences and 94 additional ecclesiastical grievances. Distributed far and wide across northern Europe (thanks to Herr Gutenberg's marvelous new printing press technology), the *95 Theses* ignited a fuse that soon exploded into that cataclysmic convulsion of faith known as the Protestant Reformation. In retaliation, Luther was condemned, banned, imprisoned, tried and excommunicated, but never successfully silenced. Hundreds of thousands rallied to his cause in Germany, France, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Bohemia, Holland, England and Scotland; other clarion voices took up the call for reform and renewal; powerful princes and their armies shielded him from Rome. Ever the pioneer, at the age of 42 he married a former nun and fathered six children!

Although Luther never viewed himself as anything more than a faithful reforming monk, his ideas clearly etched the epitaph of the dying old world and outlined the spiritual and moral constitution of an emerging new day. Although he downplayed his inspirational role in the founding of Protestant denominations, and was scandalized by the thought that

some churches would even adopt his name as their own, Luther prepared the way for the appearance of a different kind of church on earth, a church that you and I would one day be able to recognize and embrace as our own.

II. Every contemporary Christian – Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox alike – owes a tremendous debt to Martin Luther. Yet, so pervasive has been his influence on our spirituality and religious practices that we might scarcely recognize their origins or fully appreciate their significance and uniqueness.

It was Martin Luther who first gave the Bible to ordinary people and insisted that everyone should be able to hear and study the scriptures, as well as pray and worship, in his or her own native tongue. To accomplish this, Luther himself painstakingly translated the Bible out of Latin into the German language of his Wittenberg parish. We, who for the most part have always been able to come to God in a language that we understand can hardly begin to imagine what it must have felt like to experience this for the first time in the Protestant congregations of the Reformation era.

And it was Luther who first proposed, at great personal risk, that the Bible – more than the authority of tradition, more than the rule of churchly potentates or earthly princes, more than reams of doctrines, dogmas and sermons – the *Bible* should be sufficient as a Christian’s source of truth and guide to everlasting life.

Luther’s own intense study of scripture led him to a number of tremendous theological and spiritual breakthroughs, perhaps the greatest of which occurred to him early in his adult life, when he had been pondering night and day the significance of the very scripture that we heard of few moments ago:

For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written: “The one who is righteous through faith will live.” Romans 1:17

Suddenly it dawned on him: it can *only* be through faith that people are put into a right relationship with a loving and forgiving God. Not by the purchase of costly indulgences, or the erecting of lavish cathedrals, or the acquiring of worldly wealth or merit. Not by piling up good works, or fashioning eloquent prayers, or punishing one’s real or imagined sins by guilt or self-denial. Not by ritual obedience, or monastic isolation, or impoverishing one’s living; but only through faith from beginning to end, do our lives connect with the grace of God. *Sola fide!* From the Latin: “by faith alone.” And faith itself is an undeserved and unconditional gift of God!

III. Perhaps it took an individual as brash and stubborn, as brilliant and honest, as courageous and uncompromising, as full of life and wit as Martin Luther to sweep aside the crumbling, materialistic, immoral and soul-starved religion of his day in order to give us a chance to be part of a church much closer to what Martin Luther King, Jr. four hundred and fifty years later would call “the beloved community.”

But what if Martin Luther, as ever-faithful as he was, had decided *not* to use the unique and special gifts that God had given him? What if he’d concluded that the corruptions

were too sinister, the powers-that-be too entrenched, the will to reform too weak to ever change? What if he'd determined that the abuse and criticism coming his way were too intimidating, the hardships too severe, the costs too high? What if he'd finally been willing to do nothing except recant, keep his head down and endure a quiet scholar's monastic life besmirched only with hypocrisy, cynicism, negativity and spiritual emptiness?

I guess the church would have survived, but certainly it would be very different from the "family of faith" that we know and love today. Fortunately for us, instead of sitting on his gifts, Luther chose to do everything he could with what he'd been given; and what a difference that has made for the renewal of the church and the transformation of the world. He truly made his gifts count!

Now here we are in this amazingly gifted and resourceful group of Christians known as the Orinda Community Church. I look around me at this congregation and I see people who have gifts of teaching and healing and insight, mentoring and nurturing. I see others who have gifts of vision and imagination, management and administration. I see others who have gifts of music and movement, art and drama. I see others who have gifts of ministry for mercy and justice, for ecological sustainability, and world peace. I see others who have gifts of engineering and science and an understanding of how things work. I see others who have gifts of planting and growing and cleaning and fixing to make our surroundings beautiful. I see others whose gifts are prayer and discernment, caring and comforting. I see others whose gifts are hospitality, inclusion, fellowship and the building of community. I see others whose gifts are friendship and fun, wit and laughter. I see still others – many others – whose gifts are faith and hope, love and grace.

Here at Orinda Community Church we're currently in the midst of our annual stewardship season, when we ask for generous pledges and estimates of giving so that we have an idea of how to plan for the year ahead. This time, the stewardship theme is "Count Yourself Blessed," and I do believe that we are all blessed to be part of this amazingly gifted and resourceful congregation. Our gifts come from God, of course, but we, like Martin Luther in his day, are called to share and use the gifts we have been given. Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, your gift still counts! Who knows what God can do with what we have to offer? While we find out together, do consider yourself blessed!