

**“499 Years, 363 Days, 95 Theses!”
John 17:20-26**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Reformation Sunday
October 29, 2017**

(preface the sermon with a reading of John 17:20-26)

During my days in Minnesota, where I served as the Conference Minister for the United Church of Christ, I would be routinely introduced to congregations as their “Bishop”. Ministers knew that their flocks could relate to a title familiar to them in territory heavily populated with Scandinavian and German Lutherans. “Well, think of Jeff this way,” the host pastor would say. “He’s like a Bishop.” No matter that the reference was an incorrect exaggeration: Conference Ministers in the UCC are not invested with the absolute authority of “Bishops”. For the sake of convenience and comparison, the title communicated!

But imagine my surprise one Sunday morning when the pastor spontaneously promoted me. “Think of him this way”, he said, “To us, Jeff is like...the Pope!”

Looking down on that scene, my mother and father must have been amused. In our devoutly Protestant household when I was a kid, adult conversation would quiet to a whisper whenever the reference was to an individual or family who were not like us: “They’re Catholic!”

Happily, in the present, when it comes to relations between Protestants and Catholics in the context of personal routines, and usually even in the context of institutional interactions, the whispers have been replaced by respectful, friendly association. Especially this month, in religious publications, local newspapers, and

features on radio and television, the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation is receiving extraordinary attention. This weekend, various observances are focusing the interest of the world on reconciliation unprecedented between the Protestant and Catholic branches of Christianity. The Vatican and the Lutherans are communing together!!

This harmony has not always been so tangible. The horrible conflict in Northern Ireland, not too long ago, pitted Catholics and Protestants against one another. Indeed, such disdain between the loyalists of the two factions have characterized too much of the last five centuries of European history, and in turn, that animosity stowed away on ships sailing West across the Atlantic.

Karen Armstrong, perhaps Britain's foremost commentator on religious affairs, offers this sweeping description of the historical context, in her New York Times best seller entitled *The History of God*:

"The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were decisive for all the people of God...These centuries saw the Italian Renaissance...the discovery of the New World and the beginning of the scientific revolution, which would have fateful consequences for the rest of the world...characterized by anxiety as well as achievement...The laity (in Europe) were especially dissatisfied with the medieval forms of religion that no longer answered their needs in the brave new world. Great reformers gave voice to this disquiet and discovered new ways of considering God and salvation. This split Europe into two warring camps—Catholic and Protestant—which have never entirely lost their hatred and suspicion of one another...Reformers urged the faithful to rid themselves of peripheral devotion to saints and angels and to concentrate on God alone."

And who were these “great reformers”? Erasmus...Calvin...Zwingli...Henry VIII...and a Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther, who was interested first of all in reforming himself.

Luther was spiritually tormented: *“Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punished sinners, I actually loathed him...If ever a monk could get to heaven by monastic discipline, I was that monk...And yet my conscience would not give me certainty.”*

Where Luther found solace, ultimately, was in the doctrine of “justification by faith”, which of course the Apostle Paul first articulated. We cannot save ourselves. God provides everything necessary for “justification”, which is the restoration of the right relationship between a sinner and God. The practice of our faith, as incomplete and misguided as it may be, is acceptable only because of the saving act of God in Jesus Christ. We are saved by the Grace of God! Just read your Bible! That is our authority!

But Luther was not only spiritually tormented—he was also ecclesiastically tormented. And it was his re-discovered understanding of “justification by faith” that led him to challenge the ecclesiastical authority of the day, Pope Leo X. The German pastor became increasingly incensed with papal abuses, particularly the practice of “indulgences” perpetrated upon the members of his congregation. Leo, through his representative, Albert of Mainz, was essentially stealing “taxes” from poor peasants in order to pay for building the magnificent St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, where the bones of St. Peter and St. Paul were buried. Selling “indulgences”, which would supposedly

shorten a person's time in Purgatory once they died, was in reality a massive fundraising scheme playing on the fears and emotions of the poor!

In a defiant act that ultimately led to his excommunication, Martin Luther famously posted "95 Theses" on the door of the church in Wittenberg, on October 31, 1517—499 years and 363 days ago! Luther declared with unprecedented courage: "Here I Stand!" The Reformation had substance! The Church was shaken to its roots!

My wife Chris and I have climbed the narrow, winding stairs inside the curved dome of that same St. Peter's in Rome, and emerged at the top to the 360 degree view of Rome revealed around us. It is symbolic, perhaps, of the contemporary view of happier relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformed Church, as I mentioned earlier. Priests and pastors preside at mixed marriage ceremonies. Clergy of both branches serve cooperatively in communities across the country. Sincere, confessing conversations are bringing together representatives of the Catholic hierarchy and officials of Protestant denominations.

Throw into the mix the breath of fresh air, or so it seems, blowing through the Vatican. The open, pastoral style of Pope Francis has at least for now shifted the most animated dialogue from the Catholic/Protestant forum to the forum of conservative Catholics verses liberal Catholics. Traditionalists are wary, while liberals are heartened, about the current Pope's perspectives on gay marriage, abortion, and contraception. And in a reversal of the papacy's culture of luxury and opulence 500 years ago, today's Pope even suspended the so-called "Bishop of Bling" in Germany over the \$40 million renovation of his home—a renovation that was to include a bathtub valued at \$20,000.

I checked my most trusted concordance of words and verses in the Bible.

The word “bathtub” appears nowhere in the scriptures. “Bath”, “bathe”, “Bathsheba”...yes. But “bathtub”, no. What one does find in the Bible is Jesus’ plea to God, Jesus’ prayer, as reported in the Gospel of John: *“I ask on behalf of those who will believe in me...that they may all be one...so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”*

That sounds eerily like the mantra on which The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and a congregation in Hyattstown, Maryland, were founded, in the Reformist tradition.

So, for the inheritors of a tradition inspired by an ecclesiastically and spiritually tormented German monk, the question is this: What are you and I doing to manifest the love of Jesus—the love of God—that breathes life into the prayer that all of God’s children are, indeed, one?

I invite you to pause to consider your answer on Tuesday, 500 years to the day after a bold action that redefined our world.