

Old South Church in Boston

October 27, 2019 - Reformation Sunday

Read This Book, a sermon by Senior Minister, Nancy S. Taylor, based on Romans 12.2

I invite you to travel in your imaginations back in time. Imagine you are a Christian early in the 16th century in Europe; a Christian within the vast dominion of the Holy Roman Empire. You live most of your life terrified. Terrified of hell. You see, you are told – you are informed by the church, by its priests – that you are riddled with sin, so soaked and steeped in sin, so vile and wicked – that you are all but consigned to the fires of hell.

If you are a Christian early in the sixteenth century you believe in demons – demons born on the wings of the wind; demons lurking behind doors, under beds, in the branches of trees – demons whose express purpose is to torment you, lure you into sin, catch you unawares, trip you up until you topple down into the raging fires of hell.

However, there is help for you, if you seek it. There are tickets, as it were, out of hell. There are ways to compensate for your sorry, sin-soaked self.

First – and easiest, if you have the means – you can buy your way out of hell. As a Christian in the early years of the 16th century, you can literally purchase salvation. The church has its hands out and if you put enough into the church's hands, Voila! You are moved from the Hell Que to the Purgatory Que, or from the Purgatory Que to the Heaven Que.

If you don't have the cash, not to worry, there are other avenues. You can pray a specified prayer over and over again. Or you can undertake a pilgrimage to a particular holy place. Or, you can perform specified good works.

To put all of this into the language of today, it was a system of *quid pro quo*: something for something. Money for salvation. Quid pro quo. Certain prayers could earn you forgiveness. Quid pro quo. Enough good works could upgrade your seating assignment from Hell to Purgatory. Quid pro quo. If you undertook grueling pilgrimages to holy sites – and bloodied your knees crawling up the stairs to kiss an old saint's bone – you could trade guilt for forgiveness. Quid pro quo.

And the thing is, the average Christian didn't know any better because between the priests and the people there hung, as it were, a thick, heavy curtain, a curtain of Latin, a dense, opaque curtain of a strange language. It was dressed up, this curtain. It was velvety and sumptuous; it was draped in pomp and circumstance and endowed with priestly authority.

On the far side of the curtain from you, hidden from view, and wrapped in Latin, is the source book of Christianity, the Bible, a book to which you do not have access.

Enter, a young German monk, Martin Luther. Luther, shakes his head at the system of quid pro quo: money for salvation. He shakes his head at the God the system portrays: a God who is mean, vengeful, and punitive; a banker God, a money-hungry, money-counting God. A God who damns people to the fires of hell.

Luther knows better. He knows better because he knows the Bible. He is a professor of Bible at the University. He knows that this system of quid pro quo – something for something – isn't there. Isn't in the Bible. Nor is the vengeful God portrayed by such a system.

Here is what Luther does. He approaches the thick, sumptuous curtain. He pulls at it, yanks at it; he puts the whole of his strength to it. He tugs and tugs until the thick, heavy, opaque curtain comes loose and cascades to the floor in limp, plush folds. Revealed now, formerly concealed behind the curtain – is the Bible: the source-book of Christianity.

Luther translates the Bible from Latin – which virtually no one knows – into the vernacular, into the everyday, everybody-speaks-it language. He makes use of a newfangled device, the printing press. Luther and his fellow protestors churn out Bible after Bible in a language you can read. And they place Bibles into the hands of the people: into the hands of peasant and nobleman, poor and rich, woman and man, saint and sinner, immigrant and citizen.

And he says: You read it. For in this book is not so much judgement as is grace, extravagant grace, copious grace, amazing grace; so much grace it flows and spills and cascades from the heart of God.

Here. Open it. See for yourself. In this this book is mercy. More mercy than judgment! In this book is salvation and love.

The protesters, the reformers, averred “The pope's not the boss of you. But Jesus is.” In this book is Jesus. Stories about Jesus, stories by Jesus, his teachings, his acts, his miracles. And, see if you don't experience here, in this source book, a Jesus who is kindly, gentle, and compassionate. Open it. See for yourself.

And you do. You Christians of the early 16th century, you begin to open the Bible and wade in. Inside its pages, you read words the church hadn't uttered aloud for over a 1000 years; words the priests have been keeping from you.

Words like: *And God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Words like: *Jesus went throughout Galilee proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

Words like: *Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth.*

Words like: *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*

Words like: *Ask and it will be given you. Search and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.*

Words like: *Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.*

Words like: *...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

In the Bible, on its ancient pages, is the miracle of divine forgiveness. It is a miracle, because we don't earn it; we don't have to pay for it. There is no quid pro quo. That's not how the divine arithmetic works.

Luther, who had formerly been terrorized by God, who so feared God that he grew to loathe God, Luther began to relax into God's everlasting love. Over time, he entices and coaxes his fellow Christians to the same.

One of the products of the Reformation, was an outpouring of new hymns, hymns that flowed from grateful hearts; hearts relieved and released. Hymns like: *Now, thank we all our God; Ah, Holy Jesus; All people that on earth do dwell; Praise to the Lord, the Almighty.*

And there are hymns, more recent, that are unthinkable before the Reformation. Hymns like: *Precious Lord, Take My Hand; Jesus Loves Me This I know; Amazing Grace.*

Luther suffered mightily and paid a heavy toll for exposing the rot and corruption of the church, for daring to translate the Bible – the sourcebook of Christianity – into languages spoken by common people. He paid a toll for wresting sacerdotal authority from the priests and placing it into the hands of the people where the Bible claims it rightfully rests.

So, in honor of the 502nd anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, may I urge you to take up this old, holy book, and wade in? Maybe read Paul's Letter to the Romans? Maybe read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount? Read it for yourself. Don't take my word for it. After all, the main consequence and victory of the Reformation is that you have direct access to God and Jesus. Today there is neither curtain, nor priest, nor foreign tongue, nor any sort of quid pro quo standing between you and God. So, wade in and see for yourself. On its pages you will encounter a Jesus who is unfailingly kind and a God who gathers us together, to protect and comfort us, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. In this book you will encounter God's amazing grace; so much grace it gushes, spills and cascades from the heart of God.

In truth we share a lot with our 16th century ancestors. We, too, live with terror. We are too often afraid. We are afraid of illness. Of loneliness. Of old age. Of addiction. Of loss. Of poverty. Of failure. Of terror. Of natural disasters and climate catastrophes. Of war. Of death.

Hear me, believe me, when I tell you that God is not surprised by this. God understands. After all, once upon a time in a Galilee far, far away, God sent an angel to earth bearing this message: *Do not be afraid. For see, I am bringing you good news of great joy. For unto you is born a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*

This is our Reformation faith.