



October 29, 2017

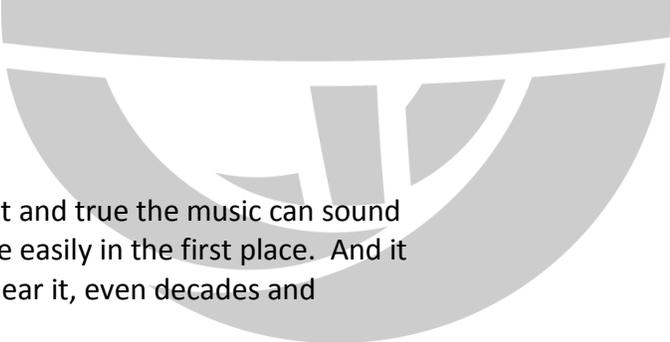
HERE I STAND!
Pastor Vern Christopherson

GALATIANS 2:16-20 NRSV

¹⁶We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. ¹⁷But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. ¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; ²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

I recently heard the end of a radio interview that included an intriguing comment. It went: “Sometimes if you want to be heard, you have to sing off key.” I never found out who said it, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Bob Giere. The comment hit home for me. It’s hard to get people’s attention these days. There’s nothing quite like dissonance to make them sit up and take notice.

Down through the years there have been plenty of people who’ve been singing off key. Perhaps you can help me identify a few of them: 1) *Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.* Who was singing off key? Abraham Lincoln. 2) *I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.* Who was singing off key? Martin Luther King, Jr. 3) *We know that a person is made right with God not by doing what the law requires, but only through faith in Jesus Christ.* Who was singing off key? The Apostle Paul.



Of course, what's amazing about singing off key is how right and true the music can sound after you've heard it for a while. That doesn't mean it came easily in the first place. And it doesn't mean that people are always ready and willing to hear it, even decades and centuries later.

In the 16th century, a German monk named Martin Luther was singing off key. You probably know by now that Luther did not set out to be a reformer. But he found himself in a situation that was deeply disturbing to him. And he felt compelled to do something about it.

In particular, Luther was troubled by the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were slips of paper promising forgiveness to a person, and fewer years in purgatory for his or her deceased relatives. They cost money, of course. A friar named John Tetzel was going up and down the streets of Wittenberg, calling out, "When the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory to heaven springs."

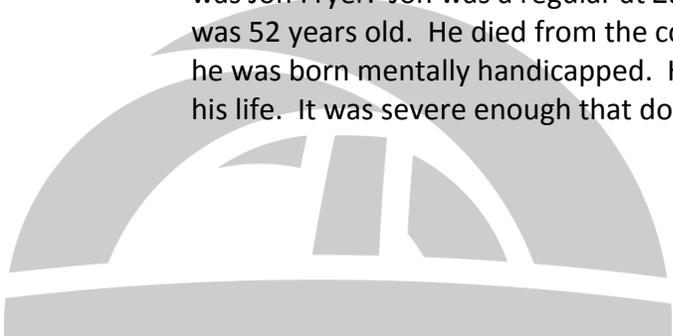
On the positive side, these indulgences were a form of penance, which is a sacrament in the Catholic Church. Penance involves a priest assessing a sinner's contrition and then providing a way for that person to make it right. He or she might be asked to say a prayer, or offer an apology, or give an offering. On the negative side, however, penance was a system open to abuse. At the time of Luther, the church was raising money for the building of St. Peter's basilica in Rome. To prime the pump, John Tetzel showed lurid pictures of family members suffering in purgatory. He pleaded with the people, "Don't you want to provide a way out for them?"

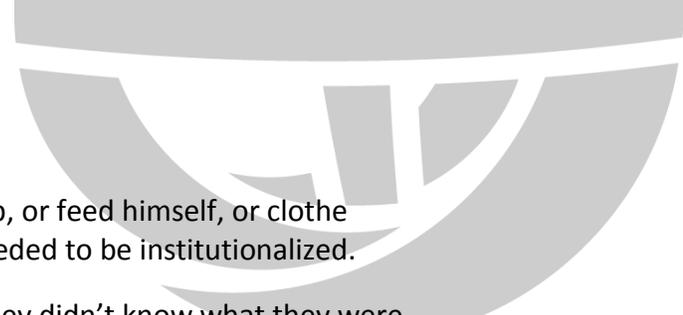
As Luther observed the actions of Tetzel, he grew increasingly agitated. He penned a series of propositions, 95 to be exact, to debate the practice of granting indulgences. He affixed them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The date was October 31, 1517 – All Hallows Eve. Why that day? Because November 1 was All Saints Day, a day bustling with the buying and selling of indulgences on behalf of those who had died.

Luther was determined to start a conversation about those practices. Oh, he'd been determined before about other issues, but his efforts went nowhere. This time, though, he got smarter. He sent a copy to the archbishop. And he sent a copy to the Wittenberg printer. That was the match that lit the fuse that upended the church and changed the world.

Again, Luther did not feel called to reform the church, at least not at first. He was a simple monk who had come to deeper understanding of God's love and mercy for us in Jesus Christ. But you know how it is: things happen in life, often unexpectedly, that force us to rearrange our best laid plans.

We had a funeral on Friday for a person who rearranged the plans of his family. The person was Jon Fryer. Jon was a regular at Zumbro, often worshipping at 8:30 in the Lounge. He was 52 years old. He died from the complications of a stroke. If you don't know Jon's story, he was born mentally handicapped. His disability became apparent during the first year of his life. It was severe enough that doctors encouraged his parents, Dick and Marilyn, not to





get too attached. Jon probably would not be able to sit up, or feed himself, or clothe himself. For his sake and for the sake of the family, he needed to be institutionalized.

That news did not sit well with the Fryers. Even though they didn't know what they were getting into, they decided to take Jon home with them, and to do their best to be a family together. Even as I say this, I know that not all families in their situation can make the same decision – it's different for everyone – but that's what the Fryers chose to do.

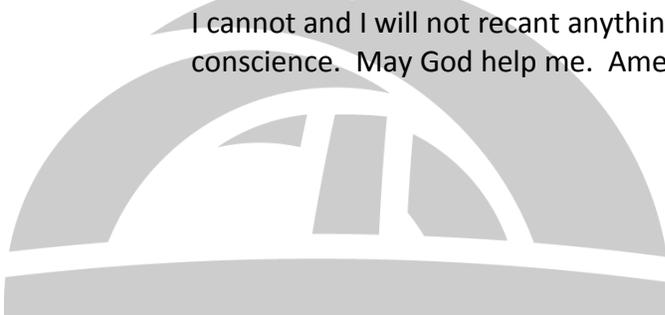
Dick and Marilyn didn't start out to be parents of a handicapped child. But you know how it is: things happen in life, often unexpectedly, that force us to rearrange our best laid plans. Jon came home with them, and the Fryers adjusted. Dick and Marilyn were upfront about Jon's condition. They discussed it openly with their two older children. "Jon may grow up to be bigger than you," they said, "but he will always have the mind of a little child." They were not shy about taking Jon out in public. That didn't mean people were always understanding and accepting. They weren't. On more than a few occasions Jon was belittled, and not just by children but by adults too. Along the way, Dick and Marilyn and Jon's siblings had to be constant advocates for him, and they did it gladly. Sometimes when you want to be heard, you have to sing off key.

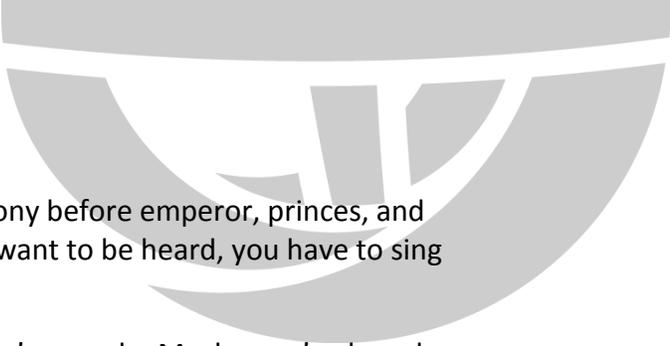
Luther's 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church were merely the tip of the iceberg. Luther continued to teach and write and raise a holy ruckus. Church officials were keeping a close eye on him, and what they saw did not please them. Early in 1520, Pope Leo was in his lodge in the mountains hunting wild boar. He wrote a treatise, "Arise, O Lord, and drive out the wild boar that has invaded your vineyard." He was talking about Luther, of course, and the church. Shortly thereafter, Leo excommunicated Luther. In his thinking, there was no place for this wild boar in the church. When Luther received the letter from the pope, he went down to the bank of the river Elbe that flowed through Wittenberg. He started a fire, and he burned it. And the Reformation was on.

In April of 1521 there was a formal assembly in the German city of Worms. The head of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V, had called the assembly. There were numerous princes, bishops, and electors in attendance. Luther was given one last chance to renounce his writings. Luther apologized for not knowing the proper way to address such an august assembly, since he was only a monk. And he admitted to getting carried away with enthusiasm in some of his writings. But those were his only concessions.

Then Luther spoke directly and clearly some of the most famous words of the Reformation. These were words that echoed throughout Europe, cementing Luther's standing as a hero of the German people, and installing him as a permanent symbol of protest against institutions of power.

Luther said, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scripture or by clear reason...I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen."





The hall erupted in an uproar. Luther had made his testimony before emperor, princes, and bishops, refusing to back down. Indeed, sometimes if you want to be heard, you have to sing off key.

There's a little phrase that occurs in some versions of Luther's speech. Maybe you've heard of it. It's "Here I stand." We're not sure if that phrase was part of the original speech or not. As I see it, though, it really doesn't matter, because that was the gist of what Luther was saying: *I didn't set out to be a reformer of the church, but here I stand against the corrupt practice of selling indulgences. Here I stand against the abuses of power. Here I stand against those who use Scripture for their own personal agenda. Here I stand. I will not back down. God help me.*

Who of us is not moved by the courage and resolve of this man who went from law school, to the monastery, to the very halls of power, and somehow found a gracious God in the process? Or maybe I should say, somehow a gracious God found him, and it made all the difference in his life.

In a few minutes, we will be making our own journey to the Wittenberg Door. This might be a challenge for some of us. Many of us grew up hearing the admonition, "Don't make a scene in public." And yet our heritage nudges us in a different direction. This direction might involve taking a stand for what we believe, speaking the truth to power, being willing to sing off key.

Our concerns may not rise to the level of those of Martin Luther, but that doesn't mean they're not important. Perhaps there is some idea, some cause, some concern that feels especially important to you this day. It might be big or small, hard or easy, long-standing or band-new. I invite you to write your concern on the slip of paper in the bulletin, bring it to the door, and ask God for whatever courage you need to do some reforming of your own.

Please pray with me: Gracious God, give us the courage we need to take a stand. Give us the conviction we need to speak out against the wrongs we see. Give us the resolve we need to sing off key, not only in the church but in the world around us. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

