

*Celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the Protestant Reformation, 1517-2017*

November 5, 2017

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ [www.buf.org](http://www.buf.org)

Rev. Paul Beckel's reflections on the significance of the reforms initiated by Luther are below.

The heart of today's service was a feisty performance of several movements of  
J.S. Bach's cantata

*Ein' Feste Burg (A Mighty Fortress)*

Featuring the BUF Chalice Choir, Director: Kevin Allen-Schmid

Violin: Grant Donnellan and John Tilley

Viola: Betsy Stuen-Walker

Cello: Tallie Jones

Oboe: Gail Ridenour and Derek Stephenson

Piano: Melanie Rieck

Organ: Don Reinke

Bass: Kevin Allen-Schmid

**Welcome**

Happy 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary! The Reformation of the European Christian Church took place over a long period of time, but if we have to point to a moment of origin, that moment would be 500 years ago this week when Martin Luther delivered a bold critique of the abuses of the church. His critique was offered as an invitation to dialogue. Instead it set off a long series of heresy trials, and wars, and insurrection against the-authoritarian-monopoly-of-church-and-state that had been synonymous with Christianity for 1,200 years.

Unitarian Universalism today draws from a wide variety of sources: the cycles of nature, personal experience of the sacred, the words and deeds of people whose lives have inspired us, the guidance of science and reason, and wisdom from the spectrum of world religions. But institutionally, and in many of our most important principles, we hearken back to Christian roots — and to the dissenters centuries ago who set us on a path toward the religious freedom we so cherish today.

It's important to call attention to the pre-modern Reformation because reform needs to continue in our postmodern context. Today, again, we're in a time of extraordinary change and social instability. It's almost as if our clocks have been turned backwards. [This was the morning we turned our clocks

back for daylight savings.] OK I don't know about you but I need a little laugh to break the tension once in a while, because:

Humanity faces an uncertain future and thus so does religion. In response we could obsess over what other religious traditions have done or are doing wrong. Or, we could learn about our shared history, and our own challenges today: to remain relevant, viable, and true to our principles.

### **Gathering Song**      #200 *A Mighty Fortress*

Note: we sang the words as written in the current UU hymnal, translated from Luther by UU minister Rev. Frederick Henry Hedge (1805-1890). This translation has been used widely in North American Protestant churches.

### **Children's Focus**      [Paul appears in knight costume]

I missed seeing you last week [Halloween] but I heard that many of you were wearing costumes. I don't know if any of you were knights (which is what I am when I'm not here telling you stories).

Maybe some of you were Jedi Knights, or soldiers, or Ninja Turtles, or karate kids. Or superheroes like Wonderwoman or Batgirl. Or maybe Harry Potter or Hermione.

If you know those characters you know that they are all fighters. And maybe you know other fighters from cartoons or movies or videogames. It's kind of strange: we cheer for them and we want them to win their fights. But if *you* get in a fight at school you'll be in big trouble.

It's kind of strange: when we send you off to your classrooms every Sunday we do not sing you a song about fighting. We sing about peace and love — which seem like the opposite of fighting.

It can be a little confusing. Because if your parents let you read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or watch *Powerpuff Girls*, or play *Pokemon*, or let you go to the church that has *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* classes, it's not because we want you to learn how to hurt people.

So if stories or games *with fighting* are ever upsetting to you— or if they make you feel like *you'd like to hurt someone* — then you should tell your parents and you should stop reading or watching those stories or playing those games. *Especially if you find yourself fighting with your parents* when they tell you you've had enough of that.

But sometimes stories and games with heroes can help us to feel brave, or to be strong and not let people be mean to us — or to not let other people be treated unfairly. Maybe if you tell yourself that you're tough, it can help you to fight through cold rain or snow when you walk to school. Or it could help you to work really hard on a problem ... or fight to get spinach into your mouth ... or fight to not let yourself eat both cookies when you should be sharing with someone else.

So we're going to sing you out to your classrooms again. We're going to sing about how we hope your life will be full of peace and love. And I'm going to put on my minister costume [clerical robe] because the adults are going to keep on talking and singing about how to be brave and honest and kind and sharing. Because those things are always more helpful than a plastic sword.

### **Message**

This coming January we will celebrate the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Edict of Torda. The Edict of Torda was a declaration of religious tolerance made in 1568 by Transylvania's King John Sigismund,

a Unitarian, to whom we trace back an important thread of our ancestry. This declaration of religious tolerance did not institute the freedom of conscience *for individuals* that we might take for granted today, but it was unprecedented at the time to allow *communities* to select their own minister and their own form of Christianity from among the four that then existed in that region: Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Unitarian.

Elsewhere in Europe, in the fallout of Martin Luther's, *Ninety-five Theses, or Disputation on the Power of Indulgences*, everyone had to follow the sect chosen by the ruler of their little fiefdom — unless they were too busy fighting in a war against a neighboring prince who had chosen different religious doctrines.

You see, as soon as Luther dissented against the Roman Catholic Church — and lived — more dissent started popping up all over. Reform-minded preachers would tell people not to put up with hypocrisy and fake interpretations of the Bible, thereby making themselves the targets of other reform-minded preachers who had other passions and perspectives.

And pretty soon the continent was a patchwork of little red states and blue states, with some scattered yellow, brown, and every once in a while a pretty one with stripes — just to keep things interesting.

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The Reformation did not come out of nowhere. Europe was so ready for it. The Church was racking up huge debts and attempting to raise funds by selling indulgences. Indulgences were certificates promising people less suffering in purgatory, which was a quasi-hellish experience that sinners had to endure after death and before heaven.

The more you paid, the less time you spent in lock-up. But then the Church made the mistake of declaring some of the indulgences invalid unless they were paid for a second time. This didn't go over well.

Europe was so ready for a breakthrough. The new movable-type printing press had initiated an era of mass communication and the circulation of ideas and information like never before. It was in this context that Martin Luther not only had *a reason to question the integrity* of the church, but *an alternative to offer*: that the Bible alone would be the authority — not the church's teachings and traditions accumulated over 1,200 years. And each person would be free to interpret the Bible for themselves.

Religious freedom as we know it today did not happen all at once. It would be a long time till anyone proposed the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But the seeds were being planted for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, government legitimized by the consent of the governed, the separation of church and state, and even religious pluralism. Not that Luther himself approved of pluralism — he wrote scathingly about the Jews — but he opened some doors through which history was launched into a new and unpredictable trajectory.

To make the Bible even more accessible, Luther created a German translation (from the Latin, which only the elite had been able to read). He made a point to use the vocabulary of the street, and put it in such songlike verse, with alliteration and forceful rhythms ... it makes me think of the emergence of rap music.

Which I point out in order to call attention to the similarities between his day and ours: in that everything, again, is subject to critique, *even the authority of empirical evidence*. We again have

culture wars, disaffection with the church, economic instability, and the illusion that we can buy our way out of suffering.

We're experiencing revolutionary advances in communications technology and the free flow of information. Authorities are facing dissent, and overreacting ... stirring up increasing resistance, which may set the stage for increasing overreaction.

Martin Luther offered his *Ninety-five Theses* as a starting point for a serious conversation about how the church, which was his world, needed to reform. Metaphorically, you could say that it has been a conversation, but a very long one involving a lot of bloodshed.

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Martin Marty, a Lutheran minister and historian of religions (with whom I was fortunate to study in seminary) has called Unitarian Universalists the “Yes-But” people. If you missed my sermon two weeks ago, check it out at [buf.org](http://www.buf.org/files/121/Sermons/best-of-buf.pdf). [<http://www.buf.org/files/121/Sermons/best-of-buf.pdf>]

... in which I elaborated on Dr. Marty's impression that in Unitarian Universalism (when we are practicing what we preach) we *tend* to say *Yes*, that is to be open to alternative ways of being and doing. *But*, we do have boundaries ... it's not the mayhem of “anything goes.”

I believe that this heritage could enable us to play a vital role in the upcoming showdown. Can we be the people, can this be the place, can our principles be the prod toward real conversation, a “Yes-But” conversation that only metaphorically involves fighting?

I think of Reformation as a way of working thru the pressing questions of the day. Mindful of how everyone is going to be affected ... methodical in our reflection on how our principles might apply today. Allowing our forms of religious practice to transform ... even as our values — which I dare say are universal human values — carry forward through the ages. Questioning authority. Questioning — which is not the same as mindlessly rejecting authority. And savoring the music, the history, and the humanity that will emerge as we battle onward.

[Throughout the service, Kevin Allen-Schmid shared the theological and historical underpinnings for Luther's original tune and text of *A Mighty Fortress* ... while describing what Bach was doing in this cantata musically (200 years later) to illustrate the lifelong battles faced by Christians to conquer the devils that beset them from all sides.]

### **Offertory**

Of course we took a collection — in celebration of the freedoms we enjoy now in not being compelled by external authorities to say that we believe what they tell us to believe ... and in acknowledgement that we are now free and responsible to create and sustain ourselves liturgically and financially.

### **Closing Song**

#291 *Die Gedanken Sind Frei* [My Thoughts are Free]