

SERMON – 10/7/07

Christianity's Family Tree: Lutheranism

Here's a question for you... what do:

- General Norman Schwarzkoph...
- Hall-of-Fame ballplayer Lou Gehrig...
- Actor Bruce Willis...
- Author Dr. Seuss (Ted Gisel)...
- Composer Johan Sebastian Bach...
- Actress Ann Margaret...
- Entrepreneur Steve Jobs...
- Actor David Hasselhoff...
- Cartoonist Gary Larson (creator of The Far Side)...
- Director Ingmar Bergman...
- Hall-of-Fame coach Tom Landry...
- Composer George Frederic Handel...
- NASCAR driver Dale Jarrett...
- Actor Dana Carvey...
- And author Garrison Keillor all have in common?
- *(pause)* THEY'RE ALL FAMOUS LUTHERANS!

Welcome to our 3rd week in our current sermon series called "Christianity's Family Tree – What Other Christians Believe and Why"...

- Each week, for 8 weeks, we'll be looking at another sister denomination in Christendom...
 - To not only learn how they came about, but also to find out what it is that they do really well, so we might become more faithful in our walk with Christ.
 - I was inspired to take on this series by Pastor Adam Hamilton of United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas...

- His study guide & leader’s book have proven invaluable to me.
- In the first two weeks of our study we got to know the Orthodox & Roman Catholic churches...
 - In the first century AD, Christianity was one church... everyone was called a “Follower of the Way.”
 - Over time, differences between Christians in the Eastern and Western halves of the Roman Empire led to a split... and in 1054, what was once one church, became two: Orthodox & the Roman Catholic Churches.
- Today, we pick up the story close to 500 years later... and from here on out, we’ll be looking at various Protestant branches of the Christian Tree... beginning with **Lutheranism.**
 - Martin Luther was a Catholic monk who found himself greatly disturbed by where the Church was going...
 - To get a sense of the climate at this time, listen to this excerpt from the *Catholic Encyclopedia* about the century leading up to Martin Luther:

“Gradually a regrettable worldliness manifested itself in many (leaders). Their chief object – to guide (humanity to its) eternal goal – claimed too seldom their attention... Many bishops and abbots (especially in countries where they were also territorial princes) bore themselves as secular rulers rather than as servants of the Church. Many members of cathedral chapters and other leaders were chiefly concerned with their income and how to increase it... Luxury prevailed widely among the higher clergy... The scientific and ascetic training of the clergy left much to be desired, the moral standard of many being very low, and the practice of celibacy not everywhere observed... As to the Christian people themselves, in numerous districts ignorance, superstition, religious indifference, and immorality were rife... From the 14th century the demand for ‘reform of head and members’ (*that means the whole Church!*)... had been voiced with ever-increasing energy by serious and discerning men.”

- Although he was ordained a priest in the Roman Catholic church, Martin Luther began having problems with the way the Church was being run... especially in light of the big “capital campaign” that was afoot!
 - The pope was raising funds to build what would become St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome... and in order to do so, a number of preachers were commissioned to travel throughout the kingdom for a major fundraising campaign.
 - One such preacher was a man named Tetzal, who came to speak in Luther’s hometown in Germany...
 - Tetzal carried the message from the pope... that any sacrificial giving towards this goal would result in extra petitions prayed on the giver’s behalf... or anyone else the giver would designate.
 - Even deceased loved ones could be prayed for, so they wouldn’t spend as long in Purgatory.
- This made Martin Luther furious! He didn’t believe this was the message of Jesus.
 - It was obvious to Luther that the Church had veered off-course over the centuries... so he wrote down 95 statements (or “theses”) questioning this & other practices of the Church.
 - He wrote them in Latin so only the scholars could read them... and he posted them on the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany...
 - Someone took those 95 statements & translated them into German... then, with the help of the newly-invented printing press, distributed them widely.
 - What happened then was quite remarkable.
- The Church not only refused to acknowledge its abuses, but they actively sought to silence Luther...
 - And out of this, a movement known as the Protestant Reformation was born.
 - Within a relatively short period of time, Lutheranism came to be the church of large portions of Germany, Denmark, Sweden & Norway...
 - (Although Luther himself never wanted them to name it after him!).

We’ve been looking at a series of charts these past few weeks...

- This is the way the Orthodox Church has viewed Christian history...
 - That they alone have carried on the complete apostolic traditions of the early church...
 - And Catholicism, then Protestantism, broke off and went in slightly different directions.
- This is the way our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters view history...
 - That they have been the ones who've stuck to the traditions of the church, while Orthodoxy and Protestantism have moved away.
- This is how the Lutheran Church views history...
 - That both Catholic & Orthodox Christians had gotten off course, ever-so-slightly... perhaps not long after Christianity became the official religion of the Empire...
 - And that over a thousand years or so, this slight deviation resulted in a church that was, ultimately, lost.
 - Luther saw himself seeking to move the Roman Catholic Church back to the path of the apostles, in what amounted to a mid-course correction.
- Today there are 82.6 million Lutheran Christians around the world... including 13.6 million members of various Lutheran denominations here in America... and they continue to preach & teach the gospel in much the same way that Luther did some 500 years ago.

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of meeting with Mitch Gowen, pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church, just down from us on Moanalua Road ... across from Toys-R-Us.

- I asked him the question I ask all the pastors I get to interview for this series... “What does it mean to be a Christian in your tradition?”
 - He said the easiest way to describe Lutherans is that “we’re about getting things right”... being 100% faithful to what they believe.
 - He explained that their Sunday worship is liturgical, sacramental & Biblical...

- They observe only 2 sacraments... Holy Communion (which each of their 2 services experience twice a month on alternating Sundays)... and Baptism (this is a picture of their baptismal font – an amazing shell!).
- Their church leadership is divided into two separate entities:
 - The **Board of Elders** oversees the spiritual & staffing issues of the church...
 - While their **President & Vice President** handle the administration...
 - Then they have a **Voter's Assembly**, which is comprised of all the confirmed members over the age of 18...

There are 3 core beliefs that Martin Luther espoused that have also become the cornerstone of many Protestant churches over the centuries...

- The first is the doctrine of **The Priesthood of All Believers**...
 - Back in his day, Churches were clergy-centered... the priests did just about everything in the worship service...
 - They chanted the hymns (the people didn't sing)...
 - They read the Scripture (most of the people were illiterate)...
 - They took both elements of Communion (the people were only served the bread)...
 - And the priests were the ones who prayed... offering up petitions on behalf of the people.
 - Martin Luther thought differently... he believed that once a person was baptized, they were ordained to do the work of God!
 - Luther translated hymns & the Scriptures from Latin into the German language, so the people could start connecting to God on their own.
 - I asked Pastor Mitch to talk a little bit more about why this is so important to Lutherans... here's what he said...

[He basically says that there aren't enough ordained ministers to do the work of the church, so we rely on every member to be "ministers" with the people they know – because your friends and family trust you, and you can impact their lives much easier than ordained ministers might be able to. That's part of the priesthood of all believers!]

- The second core belief Martin Luther highlighted was the doctrine of ‘Sola Scriptura’ – or “Scripture alone.”
 - Luther believed that the Bible was the primary authority in defining the faith & practice of Christians... not the pope... or the councils... or the church.
 - He believed that Christians were to read the Bible themselves, and interpret it with the help of the Holy Spirit (this stood in stark contrast to the church of his day, which taught that giving the Bible to the laity was dangerous and therefore the Bible should only be read & interpreted by the pope and the clergy!).
 - Luther said, “Whatever is not against Scripture is for Scripture, and Scripture is for it.”
 - This was a HUGE shift in thinking... and with the invention of the printing press, you can imagine how incredible it was for people to start to get their hands on the Bible in their own language!
- Finally, Martin Luther is known for his elucidation of the doctrine of **Justification by Faith**...
 - Luther had grown up to fear the Lord. Jesus was a judge from whom he felt nothing but condemnation.
 - Some believe he battled depression as well... needless to say, Martin Luther was overwhelmed with guilt and felt alienated from a God he could not please.
 - So he spent lots of time in the Psalms... and the book of Romans... and Luther came to understand that human beings were justified (or made right) with God, not by works, but by God’s work in Jesus Christ.
 - All we had to do was believe it.
 - (On a side note, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, also struggled with feeling the need to please God... and it wasn’t until he overheard Luther’s preface to the book of Romans being read some 200 years later, that he had his own conversion experience!)

Three central beliefs that shape so many Protestant churches today...

- We all are called by God for ministry... not all of us work in churches for a living... but we're all called by God, nonetheless...
 - Have you embraced that call? Do you feel like you have a ministry to live out in your life?
 - What happens when we begin to look at our co-workers, neighbors & family members and ask, “How can I be in ministry with them and share the love of Christ in tangible ways?”
- The Bible is a gift for everyone to share!
 - Are you making time to read it? Are you studying the Scriptures?
 - Luther was stunned to find the number of Christians in his day who didn't know the Lord's Prayer... 10 Commandments... or the Apostle's Creed.
 - (*hold up booklet*) He devised what is known as the “Small Catechism” as a tool to help believers begin to know the basics of faith...
 - If you haven't been already, maybe this is a good time to start Scripture Journaling... spending just 20 minutes each day with God in Scripture! (You can pick one up outside on the literature rack – it explains the process.)
- Finally, God loves us so much... there's nothing we can DO to get God to love us any more or any less...
 - When we believe in Jesus, we're made right with God!
 - Some people grow up in families where they rarely hear the words “I love you!”
 - As Christians, God says that to us over and over and over again... it's not about how much we DO for Him... we simply have to live as though we believe it!
 - And that is where we find joy.

It's quite a legacy he left, that Martin Luther... and I'm thankful for our Lutheran brothers and sisters who continue to live in that faith!

- May we be able to learn from their witness...
- And may we come to rest in the amazing grace of those profound truths! AMEN.