

“Knock, knock”
Who’s there?
“Martin Luther”
Martin Luther who?
Read my 95 theses if you really want to know.

Today is Halloween. Children, dressed up in costumes will soon be wandering the streets of Cambridge, knocking on doors, shouting “Trick or Treat” in search of candy.

Long before this became the custom in America, another person, on October 31, 1517, dressed up as a Catholic priest named Martin Luther, because, he was, well, Martin Luther, a Catholic priest. He went trick or treating of sorts, in Wittenberg, Germany. The only door he supposedly knocked on that day was the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

Though the idea of Luther marching through Wittenberg with hammer, nail and theses in hand in an act of defiance is questioned by historians, the story is still told, and has evolved over the years as the start of the Protestant Reformation.

What might be more accurate, though a bit more boring in the telling, is the doors of the Castle Church were used by university students and faculty to pin up announcements. Luther himself never mentions his 95 theses nor do any copies of them exist.

What we do know is that Luther had issues with the Catholic Church leadership.

His focus was on “Indulgences” which were sort of a religious “Get Out of Hell” or “Purgatory” Free card people could buy for deceased family members. You might say, it was one of the first church fund-raisers!

Luther, not exactly thrilled with this practice, took his complaints public, posting them on the social media of his day, the Castle Wittenberg Church doors.

If Staci was here this morning, she would tell you that actually, things began to change a 100 years before Luther, when Jon Huss raised concerns about the Catholic Church and the Pope. For his speaking out against their authority, you might say he received a warm welcome from the Pope, who had him burned at the stake as a heretic!

Luther and Huss were not the only “Protestors”. John Calvin and John Knox all had a hand in what is known as the Protestant Reformation.

These "Reformers" were priests in the Catholic Church. All four challenged the powerful political authority the "Church" leadership, think, Pope, had over the people.

Luther's protest took place in Germany. Calvin operated out of Geneva, Switzerland. John Knox was in Scotland.

Luther, like the other Reformers, believed that the Scriptures should be accessible for reading and interpreting by the people, and not just the priests.

Perhaps Luther's greatest contribution to our theological way of thinking was his belief that salvation is not earned by our works, but rather, by God's grace alone (justification by grace and not by works). Luther also wrote some classic hymns, like "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God". What some people do not know is that most of his hymns were written to popular beer drinking songs in his day.

John Calvin, who followed Luther, brought us the famous "T.U.L.I.P." - which stands for - "Total Depravity," "Unconditional Election," "Limited Atonement," "Irresistible Grace," "Perseverance of the Saints."

From Calvin we get the theological doctrine of "Predestination" that some are "elected" by God or "predestined" to be saved and others are "damned." A person, in Calvin's way of thinking, who is saved by God's free gift of grace, which cannot be resisted, cannot ever "fall from grace" or become "unsaved." Thus Calvinists are often referred to as the "Frozen Chosen." We also owe a deep sense of gratitude to John Calvin who is credited with starting the first free public school in Geneva.

One of Calvin's famous students was John Knox. Knox was at the center of the Reformation struggle in Scotland. You sit here this morning in the Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church because of John Knox. And in case you have not made the connection, your founding pastor, Rev. William Cargen, was from Scotland as were some of the first Cambridge settlers.

To celebrate Reformation Sunday, in some Presbyterian congregations, bagpipes are played and in a few others, who cherish their Scottish roots, Kilts are worn and there is a "Blessing of the Tartans."

Many of our Presbyterian related liberal arts colleges bear the nickname "Fighting Scots."

And "Fighting Scots" they were indeed! John Knox, as much as being the founder of Presbyterianism, was also involved in some violent struggle that led to the storming of St. Andrew's Castle, seizing the Catholic leader, Cardinal Beaton because the Cardinal had a colleague of Knox's beaten, strangled and burned. Cardinal Beaton was murdered.

While Knox did not actually kill him, he did support his murder. For his role in this violent, bloody action, Knox was sent to the galleys to serve as a slave.

As much as we give thanks for the courage of these great Reformers, we also need to acknowledge their deeply flawed humanity.

Knox, Calvin and Luther, like the other great Reformers, were far from model “Christians.”

Like Knox, Calvin was involved in the death of Michael Servetus. Servetus, challenged Calvin’s teachings in 17 different letters. Calvin, instead of inviting Servetus to a public debate, had him publicly burned at the stake as a “Heretic!”

Luther supported violent, bloody military action against the peasants, who he had previously advocated for having access to the Bible when he posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. He was also a known anti-Semitic, who blamed Jews for Jesus death.

So why do we want to honor these Reformers? That is a very good question. In the very denominations that were birthed by their teachings, they would not be allowed to serve as ministers or in our case, as Teaching or Ruling Elders.

We can and do find fault in our political and church leaders. And we also are certainly good at finding fault in other people. And God knows, even if we don’t want to admit it to ourselves, we too are deeply flawed, sinful human beings.

And yet, at the same time, we are, all of us, holy too. God is alive and active in and through us, despite our flaws and sins, shining the holy light into the darkest corners of our lives and world.

And sometimes, beyond our own ability or knowledge, that holiness shines through, lighting the way that reveals the sacred presence in our decisions, our actions, our relationships, while challenging us to remember who we are and whose we are.

As God’s people, we are, as our Protestant Reformation slogan goes - “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda” (The Church Reformed, is Always Reforming).

The history of the people of faith, from the time that people began to join together to worship God, has been about this sacred “Reformation” dance of forming ourselves and then re-forming as we grow, change, and mature in our understanding of what it means to be the gathered community of believers.

This morning, we are doing just that in our exploring dropping the Board of Deacons to form what is known as a "unicameral" board with the Session assuming those responsibilities.

We are church faced with an uncertain future as we age and decline in our membership, making it challenging for us to continue to doing ministry as we have in the past. Like so many congregations, we are having to find creative new ways to "re-form" ourselves as a faith community if we are to move forward as a local church. It is not easy.

The Session has been forming their own list of possible ideas, from an adult day care center to an art collective to offering our building to a funeral home for their expansion into the area.

Maybe, like Luther, we should tape them to the doors for the public to read them? This might help us explore possible ideas with the Cambridge area community of how we might "re-form" ourselves around the idea of what it means to be a "church" and use this building in new, creative ways.

Friends, the Church was "Formed" as a community to serve God and neighbors, and it is always "Re-Forming" itself for that very reason.

Knock, knock? Who's there? Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church who? That is the question before us this morning. Who are we?

Amen.