**St. Timothy’s October 15, 2017**

**Pastor Dan Selbo Mark 1:14-15**

**“Reformation 2017: Staying Focused On Jesus”**

Later this month, Christian Churches all around the world will be celebrating the anniversary of (an event) that took place 500 years ago that has (literally) changed the course of Christian history ever since. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany and a reforming movement, the likes of which, had never before been seen, began.

Now, at the time (when it happened), it didn’t seem like it was such a big deal and, in many ways, it wasn’t. Posting concerns or questions for public debate or discussion was about as common (in those days) as posting on one’s blog or Facebook feed is today. It was an everyday practice. No one gave it a second thought.

And yet, what happened, as a result (of what was posted) and the ensuing discussion and debate that took place (in the Church) made it (quite possibly) the most significant event (within the Church), since the time of Christ himself.

For the next three Sundays, we’re going to be spending our (sermon time) on themes or topics or teachings that grew out of that Reformation period. It was a time in our history known as the Protestant Reformation. It was a reforming movement that happened as a result of the protests that took place against some of what was (taking place) within the Roman Catholic Church.

What Luther and the other reformers did was to call the Church back to its roots, to take the Church back to the basics of the Christian faith. Because, what had happened, over the course of (more than) twelve to thirteen hundred years (if you know that history), was that the Church (for a variety of reasons) had lost its focus. Little by little, over time, it had departed from the centrality of the saving work of Christ.

Now, to be fair (to the Church) in those days, all of the pieces of the Christian faith were still there. (They were.) Our salvation, God’s love, his forgiveness and grace, the importance of good works (in the Christian life), the hope we have for heaven. Nothing was set aside. Every one of those transforming truths (and teachings) was very much real in the church of Luther’s day.

What had happened was that they had lost their connection to Jesus. They had become disconnected from the saving work of Christ. And whenever that happens in the Church, or in our individual lives, that we lose our connection with Jesus, then the message of the gospel or the (good news) of what our Lord accomplished for us on the cross, is lost as well.

As Lutheran Christians, we have a tremendous heritage. Our name (itself) comes from the one who started the Reformation 500 years ago. Nonetheless, the goal in these (next few weeks) is not to zero-in on Martin Luther (and who he was), but to remember what we have been enabled to reclaim, as 21st century Christians, as a result of the things he set in motion 500 years ago.

And so, let’s get into it. (What happened?) What was wrong in Luther’s day that led to the need for a reformation? Where had the Church gone wrong, and how had it moved (in its focus) so far from the saving work of Christ?

It’s not an easy picture to “recreate” in its entirety, especially in the time we have. What happened ended up happening over the course of more than a thousand years. But it is a picture we can (at least) begin to “reconstruct” as we think back on some of the small things (that happened) early on that caused such a large departure over time.

To get us going, think (for a moment) about what happens with a compass. You know how a compass works. A compass is designed to keep you on course. When you’re on course, you end up where you want to go. It keeps you focused in the right direction. In contrast, when you get off course or you lose your focus, even the smallest departure (over time) can send you way off.

For example, with a compass, if you’re one degree (off course), instead of being “on target,” over the course of one mile, you end up 92 feet away from where you had originally intended. (Now, that’s not bad if you’re traveling only one mile.) But for every 60 miles you travel, you end up one (full mile) away from your target.

What that means is that if you’re traveling from here (in San Jose) on the West Coast to New York City (on the East), only one degree off course, instead of ending up in New York City, you’ll find yourself just south of Boston. Now, that’s not so bad, unless you’re a Yankees fan and end up where you definitely did not want to go.

Now, take that same idea and apply it to what had happened in the Church. Over the course of more than a thousand years, one or more little departures from the faith and it all ended up in a different place. A minor misunderstanding or misinterpretation (over here), and it all changed when it (got to) here.

Some of the teachings (and practices) of the Church in Luther’s day were a major departure from what we find in the Bible. The idea of purgatory, a place where we go (after we die) to be purged (or cleansed) from our sin, has no biblical basis, but it had become (over time) a doctrine in the Church that was totally off course and needed correction.

The false teaching that we can (somehow) add to the work of Christ, (and that we need to) in order to be saved, was so far from what is found in the Scriptures that Luther couldn’t leave it alone.

The practice of indulgences, those pieces of paper, (that’s all they were), that you could purchase (for a price) that would supposedly shorten your years in purgatory and cover your sin. (Luther’s 95 theses were all over that.) It was a slap in the face of Christ, who died on the cross to pay the price (in full) for your forgiveness. It was a major departure.

How did it happen? How did the church end up so far (over time) off course? Let me give two examples of how it happened and then we’ll bring it back and see how this all applies to us today.

The first comes from that passage we read from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Chapter four is where the apostle is making the connection to the life of Abraham and how (even Abraham), who lived hundreds of years before Jesus, was justified or (made right) because of his faith. It was his faith that made him right with God. He was justified because he placed his faith in God’s promise.

Now, take a look at the screen (up front) and see what a small off-course understanding can do (over time) to our faith. Romans chapter four, verse twenty-five, is where we are. It’s a passage dealing with how we are made right or justified through our faith in Christ. It is our faith in Jesus (and what he has done) that makes us right or just in the sight of God.

Look at what happened. It’s a long history on how it all happened. For our purpose (here today), it doesn’t really matter. What happened was, in the third century (after Jesus), in translating the Bible from the (original Greek language) into Latin, the language used (in that day) by the people, look at what happened.

The word for “justification” was the Greek word “dikaiosis.” It means to be justified or declared to be righteous. It was a legal term that meant “not guilty.” In other words, in biblical terms, through the death and resurrection of Jesus and our faith in him, we are declared (by God) to be “not guilty” in the sight of God. That’s the truth of the Bible. It all depends on Christ. It’s at the heart of the Christian faith.

What happened was, in translating it from Greek into the Latin, there was a false connection made between our faith and our good works. The word they chose (in the new translation) meant that “By faith and (through good works) you can be made ‘Not Guilty.’” You wouldn’t be “declared” not guilty, you could be “made” not guilty.

Now, it’s a subtle change, but it changes everything. It’s not true. It’s not biblical. We are to do good works, but only because we are already right with God. We don’t do good works to become right. (That’s a false teaching.) We’ll talk more about this next week, in week two.) One seemingly small departure, over time, and it’s a major miss of the intended Christian target. (That’s one example.)

The second example comes from our gospel reading, in one of the two verses (we read) from Mark, chapter one. The word (in question) in this text is the Greek word “metanoia,” which translated means “repentance.” The verse says, “The time has come…The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.”

In other words, Jesus is here. The kingdom is in front of you. Repent, change your heart, believe in what God has promised. It was an internal change brought about by the presence of Christ. That was the intent of that verse.

Now, look at what happened. What happened was and, again, a small departure, but (over time) it made a major difference. Rather than translating (accurately) the word “repentance,” meaning “to change your heart,” the Latin turned it into the word “penance.” Penance was something you would do (as a result), an act (or an action) of regret.

What this led to was the idea of having to do something to make up for what you had done or failed to do. Again, it was a subtle change, but it led to a destination that was way off course. Eventually, (over time) it led to that idea of purgatory, a place where you would end up if you hadn’t done enough (while you were still alive) to make up for what you had done before you died…a major departure from the truth.

And (from there), that led to the selling of indulgences to pay for (your own) and someone else’s sin, and to a long list of (internal corruptions) within the Church that needed to be reformed. And all from a few minor off-course departures from what God revealed to us in the Bible and made possible for us in Christ. That’s where it all started.

Now, there’s a lot more we could say about all of that. This was a shortened version of a much longer history. But, let’s turn the clock ahead (500 years) and see if that same history does not apply today.

There were a number of basic teachings that grew right out of that Reformation period that are just as important for us today as they were back them. (Pastor Brian highlighted three of them in the October newsletter.) Take a look at what was “recaptured” in the Reformation, and you make the connection.

The first: “Sola Scriptura.” In the church today, we base what we teach and believe about God on “Scripture Alone.” The Bible is our sole authority. It is the foundation for everything we’re about. In all matters of faith and life, it’s the one place where we find an authoritative word from God.

What does God want me to do? The answer is found in his Word. How has God called me to live? The answer is found in God’s Word.

What’s the purpose of life? Where did this all come from and where is it all going? Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? Is there any reason for my existence and is there any hope for when I die? The answer to these and to many other questions is given to us in God’s Word.

Any departure from what God tells us (in his Word), in any area of life, will lead us to a false understanding of life. (You see it all around us.) Everywhere you look, people are living out their own made-up versions of who we are and why we are here and what matters along the way. When you see it, don’t buy into it. When you hear it, don’t fall for it. If it’s not grounded in the Word of God, no matter how good it might sound, it’s not true.

You are here because God placed you here. Your purpose in life is to give honor and glory to him. And what happens when you die, what matters along the way, it all comes back to Christ. He’s your only hope. That’s the first: “Sola Scriptura.” In the Scripture Alone we find God’s word of truth.

Here’s a second: “Sola Fide.” Because of Jesus, we know that we are justified in God’s sight by Faith Alone. It’s our faith alone that makes us right with God. Our faith in Christ, our sole and complete trust in him. That’s how we become just or right in the presence of God. Nothing else works.

Don’t ever put your faith (for becoming right before God) in anything else. (Don’t do it.) Your good works won’t save. (“The wages of sin is death.”) Your best efforts in life will always (and forever) come up short. It is our faith alone (in Christ alone) that makes us right with him. Keep your eyes (and your faith) always on Jesus. Sola Fide: By Faith Alone.

And (the third), “Sola Gratia.” We are confident that our salvation is ours by Grace Alone. (It’s by grace alone.) We don’t earn God’s favor. We can’t buy God’s love. There’s nothing we can do to merit it. It comes to us (as a free gift) by God’s grace.

When you hear those words, “Your sins are forgiven,” know that those words (in your life) are true because of Jesus. When you hear that promise proclaimed (around the table) and when you are given (in a few moments) the body and blood of Christ, know that these gifts are yours, freely given, by the grace of God and for the sake of Christ.

One small departure (in your life) and (I can promise you), you will end up in a much different place in your understanding of how this all works…and it will not be good. It all works (and only works) when it’s found and centered and built (in and upon) Christ.

Don’t ever take your eyes off Jesus, not even one degree. It’s in God’s Word Alone, through Faith Alone, by Grace Alone that we find ourselves right with God…In Christ Alone. Amen.