

Pastor Lou Quetel

**What Did We Learn From Luther?** Wednesday, September 27, 2017 7:00 PM  
SMMP COR Center Pastor Lou Quetel, pastor of Rejoice Lutheran Church in Geneva, IL

First of all, it's a great honor for me to be here. Sister Madelyn is my spiritual director and we have been at it for almost twenty years—you imagine that? So if I'm not spiritual enough, she is the one to blame.

You know, before Martin Luther died he went to the place of his birth to settle a church fight and a faithful pastor came and said, "Father Martin, are you prepared to die in the faith that you have been preaching to us all these years?" Luther is dying in his last breath, and his death by the way was not unlike Leo Tolstoy's death. When people found out that the great Martin Luther was dying thousands of people made their way to hear and lean in to his dying, gasping breath. And Luther looked at this priest who was asking him about this, and he grabbed him by the shirt, and he said, "When I die do not name the church after me." How did that go? He said, "Why would you name the church after me? Was I crucified for anybody? What have I ever done for anyone? All I am has been a beggar trying to help other people find the food." I think that's a good way to start.

Anybody here ever see the movie *Troy* with Brad Pitt? Remember that movie? Anybody ever see that movie? Remember the last part of that movie? What were the final words? The guy who plays Odysseus says, "I lived in the time of champions. I walked among the greatest." I want you to think about that for a moment. Think about the time that Luther was alive. This was the age of the late Renaissance, the time of Michelangelo and Da Vinci, Rafael. Christopher Columbus not long before this moment discovered the New World and the circumnavigation of the globe was happening. This was the time of Henry VIII, Galileo, and Pope Leo X, who was the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Any accountants here? Where are my big time business people? Lorenzo the Magnificent helped define double entry accounting, became one of the wealthiest people on this earth, and his son became Pope Leo, whose vision and passion built St. Peter's Basilica. How many here have been there? Well Luther was alive when all of these things were happening. The world that we know today is more familiar to Luther than probably a hundred years before he was born. So the Reformation comes at an amazing time.

But, you know what, let's just say a couple of things about Luther. First of all, the key questions that brought the Reformation into being, here are some that Luther was plagued with his whole life. And I think these are universal questions that probably we all ask and have asked. Is God for us or against us? What does it mean to have faith and live by faith? Can we ever be righteous and free from sin? Can we know the truth, and if so, how? Finally what does God really expect of us? What does it mean to use the life that we've been given in service of others with freedom and energy? How do we make our way through the world? These are the questions that obsessed Martin Luther. But you know, he never expected to be anything other than a successful lawyer.

So let's just say a couple of things about Luther. Let's look at his life just for a couple of minutes. First of all, he was born into a peasant family. But unusual for that time, Luther's father was able to do what virtually no one was able to do back in the day, and that was jump into a new class of people, because his father, Hans, who was a miner, through sheer industry was able to become the owner of a smelting process and he became, not wealthy, but middle-class. And in that

day that was unusual. Either you were a peasant or you were an aristocrat or you were a member of the Church in some way. But his dad was beginning to be the vanguard of a whole new strata of society. And the old man only had one passion in his life. He had three kids, and he put everything he had into educating his oldest son, Martin. And Martin went to the best schools that Germany had. He was educated to such a high degree that he ended up going to college. He got a master's degree and then he was going to law school. And all the doors of society were opening up to him. He was groomed to be the counselor of the princes of Germany. He wouldn't be living in some stinking hut for the rest of his life, but in palaces. And Hans was so proud that his son was going to become wealthy and famous, and he was looking for a cool retirement himself.

Has anybody here ever had a near-death experience? Maybe you don't have to raise your hand. Anybody here have the near-death experience? When I was in high school, a sophomore in high school, I was buying tickets for the *Fillmore East* in a bad neighborhood in New York City. And I was almost killed by a deranged heroin addict, very common in New York at that time. And I remember how with this giant knife in my throat and this poor guy in the throes of a heroin thing, and I just had this thought as a sophomore in high school. I'm 63 now; I can remember it like it was yesterday. And I remember thinking, man, if this goes down bad, my mom is going to be really sad. But the thought that came to my mind more than anything else was "Jesus, have mercy on me!" And I don't know where that thought came from. I had this instinctual sense that if I was going to be standing in front of God Almighty in just a few minutes, which I sincerely thought was going to happen, I only had one fear and one certainty, and that was I am not ready for that encounter.

And see, that's what happened to Luther. Luther was on his way. He made some money on the side playing the lute in bars. He was a facile singer and he could play a mean lute. And on the way of walking through the Thuringian forest he almost was hit by a bolt of lightning, and it scared him to death! And he hits the ground in a heightened sense of anxiety and he prays to the patron saint of miners, St. Anne. He says, "St. Anne, save me, and I will become a monk." He made his way back home and he fulfilled his promise. He gave away his books. He goes to the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, which was an important city back in the day and he writes his dad and says, "Dad, guess what? I'm dropping out a law school. That thing about counseling princes and all that, I'm going to become a monk and I'm going to spend my days trying to get my soul prepared for heaven. I renounce all my earthly goods." How do you think old Hans felt about that, by the way? Not happy, not happy at all!

Now Luther becomes a monk and he becomes such a devout monk and he takes his monk vows so seriously. And for those of us, and I have spent weeks in silent retreats in monasteries and I've been through that scene where you get up early in the morning. You have five times of prayer every day. You work in the garden; you do all that stuff, and he did it all the time. But he had such a heightened sense that, you know, no matter how many *Hail Marys* I say, no matter how many *Our Fathers* I say, I'm not feeling the vive of God's pleasure in my life. In fact if being a monk is trying to help me to become more soulful and serene and happy as a Christian, I must be missing something because nothing is working.

Luther believed that he had such a sinful conscience that in order to be shriven, he had to make sure he confessed all of his sins. By the way, I grew up Catholic. My mother is from Catholic Spain; my father is from France. They are all Catholics. I know what confession is all about.

Luther would go into the confessional and six hours later he would still be at it. [Aside to Father Paul: “Father, how would you like that?” Father Paul: “I’d be sending him on his way.”] And that’s exactly what happened. He said, “Young man, you are in a narcissistic bind. God loves you. You gotta get out of your own head. Now we all know you’re smart. You are very well educated, so here’s the deal. You have too much time thinking about yourself. I’m sending you back to school. You’re going to learn Greek. You’re going to learn Hebrew, and you are going to become a Bible teacher at this new University called *Wittenberg University*,” that the Elector Frederick the Wise was building. And what are the three vows of a monk, by the way; what are the three vows? “Poverty, chastity, and obedience.” Right obedience, Luther had no choice. So he said, “Okay.” And like everything else he did he goes all in. Luther was all in! And he begins to read the Bible after he learns Hebrew. He had such a facility for language and learning that he learns Greek and Hebrew in record time, and he begins to lecture in this new university on the Psalms. He becomes such a passionate lecturer that the sons of the wealthy only want to be in his class. For those of us who had great high school teachers and great college professors, and you think about the professors that make the most impact on your life or the teachers or the priests or the people who spoke to you and spoke heart-to-heart and connected in the most visceral way that the classroom was electric. And for the first time people are talking in class, not reading the sentences of Peter Lombard or the works of the Thomas Aquinas, which I’ve read and it’s impossible to understand, well for most of us. [Aside to Father Paul: “Am I wrong or am I right about that? Well you understand. I had a hard time.”] So Luther becomes a passionate teacher and the biblical languages open up a new dimension of immediacy.

Now while all this is going on, Pope Leo had the vision to build St. Peters; and to build it they had to raise phenomenal sums of money. And what happened at that time was they hired a Dominican Friar who made a fortune in selling indulgences. He made a commission on it and he was one of the wealthiest churchmen in the world, and that’s saying a lot because churchmen were extremely wealthy. Remember about one third of Italy was the private kingdom of the pope himself. And this was the plenary indulgence, which meant, and Tetzal sold it to the degree, that if you paid this indulgence, not only would you be given a “get out of purgatory free card,” but you could get your dead relatives out as well; Confession not necessary. Now Frederick the Wise wouldn’t allow Tetzal in his own kingdom, but everybody crossed the river to buy these indulgences.

And Luther had one of these serendipitous moments when he found one of his parishioners like lying dead drunk in the street. And he said, “Okay when you sober up, I want to see you in Confession.” And he said, “Confession? I don’t need to go to no Confession.” And he pulls out of his pocket the plenary indulgence. He said, “I don’t need to go; I’ve got this. I’m cool.” Luther says, “What is that? Show me what that is.” He picks it up and it’s got that beautiful seal with the pope’s tiara and the keys and all that, those beautiful rich waxy seals and the beautiful writing. Luther reads it, and he goes back to his room and he said, can this be true? I’ve just read the Bible in the original languages. I don’t really see anything about getting years out of purgatory. I don’t see any of that. I don’t see penitence for sale.

Now remember Luther is a monk. He is a teacher. He is now a priest. And just to give you a sense of the facility of Luther’s mind, like if you or I were doing it, we might be able to come up with maybe five or six reasons that this might be a debatable subject. Remember the ninety-five theses was originally written in Latin only for the clergy to debate. But remember this is the time of

the printing press. Remember Luther was a teacher. We will come back to that in a second. So Luther writes out not five, not ten, not twenty, not thirty, not fifty, not seventy, not eighty, not ninety, but ninety-five reasons why he has a problem with that. And he doesn't realize what he is actually doing is cutting into the very authority of the cultural and spiritual authority of the pope. All he is trying to do is consider: Are indulgences a legitimate way to evade true penance? And see for Luther he couldn't get it—here is a guy who is in Confession for eight hours. Of course penance matters to him.

And what happened? His students, you know, they know Latin; they are the rich, the snottose sons of the wealthy. They are punks. And they read this ninety-five theses and they go, “Whoa, look, at this!” This is like incendiary. And by the way, the Germans weren't too keen on the Italians at that point. The Germans did not want to see all their gold crossing the river and going to Italy. They translate Luther's Latin into German. They go down to the local printer, and they print it up. In two weeks Luther becomes the most famous person in Germany by the sheer miraculous stuff of the printing press.

So what happens after this is people get wind of what Luther is doing. But Luther now becomes more and more famous in Germany. When the Pope finds out that there is this monk somewhere in Germany talking smack against him, he basically says, “Okay, thanks for your ministry, Mr. Luther. You are done! Your career as a teacher and writer is over.” And Luther said, “I don't think so; I'm not going to stop.” Luther was protected by Frederick the Wise.

Now things begin to heat up, and Luther as a teacher becomes a writer and he begins to write and write and write and write. What was the year of the Reformation? 1517. Luther died in 1546. Luther wrote one book every two weeks from 1517 to his death in 1546. I studied the Luther archives. You couldn't read all the stuff he wrote in your whole life. He is like Mozart, in a way. You could not copy out all of Mozart's writings if you had a whole lifetime to do it. But that's what Luther did. He wrote and wrote and wrote, and the more he wrote, the more he began to have arguments with the papal theology. It finally all came to a head when Luther was excommunicated. The pope said, “We gave you every chance, and now we are going to excommunicate you.” Luther took that bull of excommunication and threw it in the fire. This was in 1521. This begins the real problems. This is where the antagonism just really elevates.

Now at this time what is going on? Charles V becomes the Holy Roman Emperor. Charles V was the Spanish descendent of Isabella and Ferdinand. What do we know about them? Christopher Columbus, you know, all the gold coming into Spain, all of that—at 17 years old he becomes the most influential person in the world and the richest. He is devout. He is Spanish, but he is also the ruler now of Germany. And the Germans do not want to surrender Luther because the pope said, “I want you to send Luther to Rome.” What would happen to Luther in Rome? Sad to say, he would have been burned at the stake. Frederick the Wise said, “Luther is my subject. I am the one who decides. As the Prince of Saxony I decide what happens to my subject, and Luther is staying put.” The irony is Frederick the Wise is one of the most faithful Catholic magistrates there was. But this was a matter of principle for him.

But it all comes down at the Diet of Worms. You all remember that? The Diet of Worms where Charles V and all of the high-ranking clergy, everyone was meeting for the imperial diet. And Luther is summoned to stand in front of Charles V. Luther is put on trial and they demand that

he recant everything that he has written, everything that he said. The guy is like power dressing, he has all his soldiers around. And Luther comes in as a humble monk. Now remember Luther the reformer, Luther the Protestant doesn't exist at this time. All Luther knows is that he is a faithful monk, Augustinian priest, struggling and grasping for the truth, and he is not willing to stop. He is going to follow that lead wherever it goes. And now the road came to a dead end, and standing in front of him is the autocrat of Europe. He looks at Martin Luther and says, "We have had enough of your heresies. Now we are giving you a chance. Do you recant everything that you have written?" Luther looks at all these august personalities and he said, "Look, I'm just a humble monk. Can I have one more day to think about it?" They granted him that privilege and they said, "Fine, we meet back again tomorrow." And all night long he is just sick to his stomach. He is anxious and he is wondering maybe I have it wrong. Maybe I should just kind of fold the whole thing up at this point. He is with his friends, his students, and they are all talking in the evening and when it was all over, he says, "I am going to just trust that something good is going to happen." So the emperor says, "Martin Luther, without horns give us your answer." Does anybody know what are the famous words that Luther spoke? Yes, he said, "It's neither right to go against conscience, therefore my conscience is captive to the word of God, therefore I cannot and I will not recant. Here I stand. God help me, Amen." He fully expected to be burned at the stake because that's what happened to Jan Hus and many others.

But see once again, Luther got lucky. It's like a chess game; he's the pawn, but the queen is protecting his little square. He is given safe conduct to go back to Wittenberg, and upon landing in Wittenberg he would have been arrested, and then he would have been sent to Rome, and that was it. Frederick the Wise called his knights together and said, "As Luther makes his journey what I want you to do is kidnap him and take him to a safe place, and don't tell me where it is, because if I'm put on trial and they say, 'Where is Luther?' I can hold my hand on the Bible and say, 'I have no idea.'" Luther goes to this untenanted fortress in the mountains, actually a hunting Lodge, the Wartburg. Has anybody ever been there, by the way—the Wartburg? While he is there he makes the most of the time, and what does he do? He translates the New Testament from Greek into German. Where are my German folks here; anybody here German? The German language that you grew up with and know that's a creation, that's a corollary, of Luther's translation of the Bible.

So while he is at the Wartburg the Reformation blows up. And all the things that they told Luther, "Luther if you give everybody the Bible, if you give everyone the chance to read the Scriptures on their own, you're going to get confusion, you are going to get cults, you are going to get lunatics creating their own faith." I mean, because anybody with a concordance and the Bible can prove anything they want. "You are going to ruin the Church. This is not right." And they were actually correct about that. So while Luther is in the Wartburg you get these self-ordained prophets who were starting their own faith, and they think that they're doing the right thing. The only problem is they are not learned like Luther. They don't know what they're talking about. So Luther leaves the Wartburg. He goes back to Wittenberg and for the rest of his life he writes, he teaches and he becomes the reformer that we know. So that's a little bit of his biography. I think the biography is the most interesting thing anyway.

So what were Luther's key ideas? Luther said the Church is invisible. It's made up of people that we think are faithful and the ones we might think are not faithful, and only God really knows. Luther said that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. Luther felt there was no distinction between the clergy and the laity; there was no ontological distinction between clergy

and laity. And where did Luther get this? He gets it from his favorite book in the Bible, which was First Peter. Anybody know the verses 1 Peter, chapter 2: 9-10? “You are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people in order that you may declare the marvelous deeds’ of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.” Luther said, “What does that mean that we are all priests to one another?” Luther believed that if we want to see God, he believed in paradox. He believed that all truth, all theology was paradox. So he was very much not Thomas Aquinas, natural theology. For Luther, he said, “If we want to see the real face of transcendent holy other, God Almighty, there is only one place where we will catch a glimpse of that, and that is in the face of the dying man, Jesus, on the cross. For Luther, it was the paradox, the theology of the cross. That’s what was the big thing for him.

He believed that parents needed to know and model and teach the faith to their children, and that religious education was a family affair. He wrote the *Small Catechism*, which next to the Bible may be the highest selling book ever written. Luther believed the Church should be a happening, and so Luther created hymns that are sung in the language of the people. For Luther, he had the priest turn not his back to the congregation, but front to the congregation, and he put the sermon at the core of the church service. Congregational singing—the Church was a happening to Luther. Luther also democratized the Church because he believed that every Christian has a vocation, and we can serve God whether we are priests or nuns or farmers or milkmaids. If we serve with love for others, we have a vocation as Christians, and for Luther that was important.

*Simul Justus et Peccator*. What does that mean? For my Latin scholars here, I mean, you all grew up studying Latin—didn’t you? You are all Catholic; you all know Latin. *Simul Justus et Peccator*. [From Father Paul: “At the same time just and sinful.”] Yes. Luther said, “We are sinners by nature.” In other words, sin is not verbs, little things that we do. Sin is a noun; it’s something that we are, but we are righteous because God has declared us righteous. There’s nothing we can do to earn that righteousness. So for Luther he changed the idea of what righteousness was, that it’s not something that we have to earn—that’s why he went to the monastery, to earn his way for peace, and it didn’t work for him. For Luther righteousness is not an act or acts that we do to rig ourselves out so that we can stand before God and say, “God thanks for everything, and here’s what I’m bringing to the table.” Luther says, “We bring nothing to the table.” The righteousness that we have is an alien righteousness, and for him that was what grace was, a righteousness that comes to us independent of anything we are or can do; that’s what grace is. So for Luther faith was trusting and believing what God has done for us is enough.

What’s the legacy of Luther? Literacy, education; because Luther wanted everybody to read the Bible, they needed to learn how to read. To learn how to read they have to be taught. So the whole idea of public education comes from Martin Luther. A new way of being Church, the language that we speak, a new way of being free. A music, the literary output. And after the Reformation the university became the center of “Protestant Churches.” The university, so learning became the high point.

I will end here with just a few things. So how do we assess Luther? What do we make of him? He was a flawed, sinful person who only was struggling for the light—that’s it! But he was a unique person in a unique moment in a unique time where everything seemed to come together, a *kairos* moment in history. You know, the last century *Time* magazine said in the millennium issue, who was the most important and influential person? Martin Luther.

But his legacy was great in many ways, but let's own and be frank about the dark side of Lutheranism. Peasants used Lutheranism to try to rise up and kill the princes. Where are my historians here? How did that go? Not good. The peasants got whacked. They blamed Luther for that. Luther put the Church into the hands of the princes when he could no longer trust the bishops. And for very few princes that was okay, but most princes looked at the Church and wanted the lands; they wanted the goods of the Church and they took it for themselves, and they used Luther as a chump and a pawn to get rich and more powerful. That was bad. Luther split the Church, not because he wanted to, but that's just the way it was. And it gave rise to many denominations and cults and wackos and all that which we have today. How many denominations do you think are in America today? I think the answer is thirty-three thousand. The slide to cheap grace, that we begin to take grace for granted: well if God has forgiven us and we really don't have to do anything, well, God will forgive us; it's his business. That's what the German poet, Heinrich Heine, once said: "God will forgive me; it's his business." Dietrich Bonhoeffer in World War II wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*, saying that cheap grace, where we do not have the gratitude necessary, that's a problem. Late in his life, Luther attacked the Jews in a terrible way. And there's no escaping that was a hellish, awful thing. And some write it off as senility, some cultural, some however way you want it. However you want to look at it, we have nothing but an outrage that Luther besmeared his reputation by this, and there's no getting around that. I think I am going to put a period here. You guys have been great; thanks for staying with me, and I'll turn it over to Father.