Hey, Leo! It's Me, Martin!

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

There are moments in life when you just have to speak up. There are moments when so much is at stake, something so wrong is taking place, that the option of keeping your mouth closed and your opinion to yourself is impossible to rationalize. In these specific moments, you think, "I know someone is going to be upset, but I just have to say *something*!" So you muster the courage and say, "Hey, you! Are you there? It's me. We need to talk."

Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever taken this kind of action? And then, just as you feared, once you open your big mouth, your words spark a much bigger deal than you'd ever intended. Those moments are fun, aren't they?

If you can relate, then you know exactly how a little-known pastor and college professor in the modest town of Wittenberg, Germany, felt after tacking his *95 Theses* to the main doors of the local Catholic church.

The man was Martin Luther. The day was All Hallow's Eve, the precursor to what we celebrate today as Halloween. Luther knew that on this day the villagers, students and fellow college faculty would file through those church doors for a special mass and that, while entering, some would stop to read his pastoral thoughts on problems in the church at large.

Luther wasn't the first to post things on the door. Back then, church doors were commonly used as a community bulletin board of sorts.

He wasn't doing anything that hadn't been done a hundred times before. To be fair, he must have known that this would eventually get the attention of some people in power —

perhaps even Leo (X), the pope. It was, in some ways, a means of tapping the powers that be on the shoulder and saying, “Hey, there! It’s Martin. We need to talk.” But Luther certainly couldn’t have imagined his actions would spark a revolution that’s still ringing loud and strong nearly 500 years later.

Today is the 493rd anniversary of Luther’s posting his *95 Theses* on the doors of Wittenberg’s Castle Church, an event that sparked what we know as the Protestant Reformation. Luther wasn’t the only figure of the Reformation, of course, but because today, October 31, is when Luther pounded a tract on the church door, it’s only fitting to take a look at this courageous and tsunami-inducing event.

But at the genesis of this history-shaping, Jesus-focused revolution was one man, one pastor, who simply saw something wrong and offered a solution. He was a man who believed that every once in awhile, something is so bad that you simply can’t stay silent. Sometimes you have to speak up. And we’ve all been there.

Perhaps you already know this, but something we have to understand is that the Christian church in Luther’s day was a much different deal than it is today. While you and I live in a world in which Christianity is like ice cream, different flavors for different tastes, it was completely different 500 years ago. Catholicism was the only game in town. Plus, church and state were so closely mixed that the church at the time had significant political power in almost every town. Lastly, rather than a common understanding that God’s Word was to be upheld as the highest authority, in Luther’s day the pope was often given the last word.

One reading of his *95 Theses* will tell you that he had become incredibly concerned that amid the church's massive influence something of massive importance had gotten lost — or, at the very least, become obscured.

What might that be, you ask?

Just a little something we like to think of as the gospel.

In today's text, we hear Paul commending the Christians gathered in Thessalonica. He applauds their growing faith in Christ and their visible love for one another. Faith and love are blossoming despite intense persecution and public scorn over their devotion to Jesus. And their steadfastness in the fight of faith has drawn Paul to pray even harder for his friends.

In particular, Paul prays that they would continue to mature in the faith, that God would enable all their faith-filled efforts to succeed, that his power would be put on display through their good work and that, as a result, Jesus Christ would get massive amounts of glory — both in their believing hearts and in their unbelieving town.

And in these few words, from one church-planting pastor to his persecuted people, we can hear the very message, the very gospel, that Martin Luther rightly feared was forgotten. In Luther's day, pastors did little preaching, and there was almost no Bible study among the people. In the 16th century, most pastors were ill-trained or not trained at all. Knowledge of the Scriptures was considered something for university professors, so parish pastors were seen as largely ceremonial, best used for walking the public through mass and hearing personal confession. Likewise, literacy was rather uncommon among everyday churchgoers, and even if one could read and write in German, the available Bibles were only in Latin.

It's no wonder the message of God's work on behalf of the world through Jesus Christ had become more frighteningly hidden than your 8-year-old in a high-dollar Halloween costume. With the Scriptures largely unpreached and the people mostly unaware, the focus shifted off of Jesus and onto us. That is, rather than a message of grace that glorified God's Son, it became a message of works that put the burden of salvation on God's people.

Church officials sold indulgences, claiming they set sinful souls free from purgatory and into the arms of Christ, and used the money to build fancy digs. The sermon was a mix of metaphysical mathematics and personal morality: Grace plus good works is what gets you in the door. Yes, Christ died on the cross, but in order to be assured of salvation, people also had to do their best.

But God's Word told Luther, and tells us, something drastically different. We see it in Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonians. Look closely at his words:

Who is it that makes us worthy? It's God (v. 11).

Who is the One who will fulfill our efforts and be the power behind even our puniest of works? It's God (v. 11).

Who is the One who receives all the glory and has earned for us God's gracious attitude? It's Jesus (v. 12).

The true gospel is this: We're too broken and messed up to stand in God's presence, but he makes us worthy to walk in his love. We're weak and unable to do what's right, but God, in his goodness, provides us with power. We don't deserve such gifts, yet God showers us in grace. Most of all, none of it can be earned. Therefore, Christ has claimed it for us through his death

on the cross. God does all the work. We reap all the reward, and Jesus gets every ounce of the glory. *Salvation is ours to receive, but it isn't ours to earn. By faith alone*. Our right standing with God as members of his family is given to us as a gift; we are passive receivers, not active earners.

Studying these words and reflecting on this point in history should give us pause. Are we the kind of church in which people feel safe to share their opinions?

Are we a safe place for members and guests to raise their hands and ask "why" we teach certain things, why we worship in a certain way or what we believe about a particular topic or issue? How would we, as a church community, respond if someone pointed out flaws in our ministry or our preaching, a truth we've neglected or a people group we've forgotten? Would we welcome constructive criticism with dialogue? Would we shut it down out of pride? Likewise, it's good for us to use these words and this day to examine how well we've personally absorbed and live in the gospel. Is there a part of us that still believes we must earn a right standing in God's eyes — or at least prove that we really want, really long, for his love? When we do something good, are we picturing in our mind some kind of karmic scale we're trying to tip in our favor?

Are our efforts to be a decent dad, a patient mom, a good kid or a faithful Christian flowing *toward our salvation*, as if to secure it, or *from our salvation*, as a joyful response to it? Good questions.

For Luther, such questions were essential for ensuring that the Church universal — and we, as the church local — are walking in the freeing light of grace, not under the evil burden of

believing that God's love is contingent on our works. And while some people argued that such a Jesus-centered, grace-alone view of salvation would lead to lazy followers of Christ, Luther rightly proclaimed the opposite.

From his lectures on Galatians, Luther writes: "When I have this righteousness within me, I can descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises."

Later, in his work on the book of Romans, Luther writes: "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all other creatures … without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him his grace."

For Luther, this message was so freeing, so wonderful and so good for the world that if it was being twisted, forgotten or fought against, something simply had to be said, even if that would get him in trouble.

You've been there. We've all been there.

And boy, did it get him in trouble.

After posting his list on the door of his local church, Luther would later be forced to appear at hearings and give numerous accounts of all he believed. The pressure weighed on Luther who — at the Diet of Worms in 1521 — was told to recant his teachings or face the prospect of death. This was his response: *"Hey, Leo! It's me, Martin! Unless I am convinced by*

proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." The first part, of course, I made up.

Luther's refusal resulted in his excommunication. He was forced to live in hiding, under the condemnation of popes and emperors, as well as the constant threat of execution at the stake.

But a funny thing happens when you stand up and speak the truth. Even if people in charge don't agree, the rest of the world standing near you still hears it. They can believe it. They can join you in sharing it and fighting for it. That's exactly what happened with Martin Luther. Others saw the message he'd rediscovered in the Scriptures and the abuses he noted in the church. Suddenly, what started with a lengthy note from one pastor to a powerful pope became a massive movement championing the message of grace.

Though in hiding, Luther kept on writing. He saw to it that the truth of Christ made its way into the hands and hearts of everyday people. He went on to translate the entire Bible into German and coordinated a German-language mass, both firsts. His greatest joy was the completion of a catechism — an overview of Christian doctrine and life — that was intended to help fathers teach the basics of following Jesus to their children. That same catechism, Luther and others would eventually take from house to house in an effort to personally pastor the people.

There are moments in life when you just have to speak up. There are certain moments, certain situations where you think, "I know someone might be mad or disagree, but I just have

to say *something*!"

May we be a church that welcomes those moments when they arise in others. May we be people who can't sit still in the face of injustice, error and oversight. Most of all, may the unwavering confidence we have in God's grace drive us to do good, loving, selfless, joyous, Jesus-glorifying things. Let it free us to serve our neighbors, share our goods and, when necessary, *speak our minds*. Why? Because sometimes doing so can change the world.

"Are you there, Leo? It's me, Martin. We need to talk."

Amen.

#509 - God's Word is Our Great Heritage

Closing #504 - A Mighty Fortress