

“My Faith Goal”

Romans 3:19-28

In 1517 in Saxony and in much of Europe, many thousands were repenting, undergoing a change of heart, and being forgiven. But there was discontent in the minds of many of those same people about how this change came about: through a system we often call the rites of penance. This is the nerve Luther struck in his attempt to “reform” the Catholic Church.

In the Catholic understanding in 1517, based on some clues from scriptures and developed by theologians of the church, people who died had sinned, and these sins displeased God the Judge and had to be “purged” before the resurrected person could experience the fullness of heaven.

That place of purging was called purgatory. The Catholics, terrified by the threat of hell and not too cheery about the threat of suffering in purgatory – did believe in a loving and gracious God who somehow had to make provision for a happy after life. Here is where the system came in. Believers could be totally or partially purged in this life which would eliminate or lessen the time they had to spend suffering in purgatory.

Your time in purgatory was minimized by “good works” such as fasting, prayer, disciplines, works of love, and of course, large donations to the church and many were major contributors.

But after death, a different calculus came into play. Since sinners could no longer contribute to salvation in any direct way, you were dependent on the good works of others who were still alive to get you out of purgatory.

People who were left behind on earth, then, out of fear for the punishment of others important to them – usually relatives and friends – could make their contribution through the purchasing of indulgences.

It is not hard to see that such a system appealed to the sympathetic and soft-hearted, generous people who, readily or resentfully, did without some of their wealth for the sake of those in purgatory. It is also not hard to see that such a system also attracted graft, misrepresentation, and the exploitation of grieving people.

Who profited? Where the system was pure, proceeds went to the purchase of church property or works of charity. Speaking of church property helps us pin down a schedule for measuring corruption around 1517. Roman Catholic authorities were raising funds to build what was and is the largest sanctuary in the Christian world, St. Peter's in Rome.

In Rome! This meant a foreign scene, across the Alps, in domains ruled by princes and bishops who did not represent the people living in German lands or elsewhere beyond Rome. People were made even more angry by specialists who tried to work the system. The most notorious of these was a Dominican priest, Johannes Tetzel who worked the German territories to profit his sponsors and himself at the expense of the Germans who already didn't like Rome all that much!

With Luther's posting of the 95 Theses, the fire was lit. The problem to which all of his 95 Theses related had to do with Luther's focus, with Luther's obsession; the biblical claim that one is made right with God not through any good works and certainly not through the purchase of a piece of paper from the church: but entirely by divine grace through faith. We are saved by God's grace through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Luther drove his theology home with pictures and stories that everyone could understand. He came to the publishing scene where movable type was new, books had become more easily available, and some of the major artists of the day were drawn to his gospel preaching. He would see even his earliest printed books brightened with woodcuts, often of biblical scenes. My favorite is Luther's seal, which I have tattooed on my left shoulder. For important people of his day, the etched symbol of its owner told others something about him or her. Picture the typical coat of arms of princes and bishops with swords and spears suggesting militancy.

Luther was not above resorting to military images. His best known hymn, a takeoff on Psalm 46, was "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, a sword and shield victorious; he breaks the cruel oppressor's rod and wins salvation glorious. The Old satanic foe has sworn to work us woe! With craft and dreadful might he arms himself to fight. On earth he has no equal."

But that song talks about God, not about Luther. He made a choice of expression in what is today called "The Luther Seal". Its designer was Lazarus Spengler, an artist who served Prince John Frederick of Saxony, who based it on a letter he received from Martin Luther on July 8, 1530 in which Luther described the seal.

The seal's central and dominant feature was a red heart, but on it was an even more prominent cross, black because the cross "mortifies and should also cause pain". Yet the heart itself, he went on "retains its natural color", red. Why? It does not corrupt nature, that is, it does not kill but keeps alive".

Beyond the black cross and red heart is a white rose, "for white is the color of the spirits and the angels". The white rose is "to show that faith in the crucified gives joy, comfort, and peace".

Luther goes on, “Such a rose should stand in a sky blue field, symbolizing that such joy in spirit and faith is a beginning of the heavenly future joy, which begins already, but is grasped in hope, not yet revealed”.

Luther rounds things out by describing, surrounding it all, “A golden ring, symbolizing that such blessedness in heaven lasts forever and has no end.” Luther called the seal “a summary of theology”.

Romans 3:28 – “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”.

So, no matter how many good works we do in response to our faith, no matter how much money we give to support the ministries of our church in response to our faith, we are only saved by God’s grace through our faith in Christ.

For the past month, we’ve been watching faith-filled videos and reading letters and newsletter articles from our stewardship board encouraging us to establish “My Faith Goal” for 2023.

For the past 19 ½ years that I’ve served the faithful people of Divinity, God has blessed us to make budget every year at the end of December. We’ve gone right down to the wire every year, testing my pacemaker/defibrillator!

Thanks to a large donation by one of our members designated for a new pastor, we will overlap for the next two years before I retire. The gift was given in hopes of having a much smoother transition than the last one. We hope to model Pastor Don’s retirement when Pastor Terry who was already on staff stepped in to replace him.

So what is your faith goal for 2023?

Most of us have no problem giving God our time and our talent, but some draw the line when it comes to their treasure or their material possessions. When they do so, they demonstrate conclusively that they are unfamiliar with the first premise of total stewardship: God owns everything. We are just managers of what He has entrusted to us.

Throughout Scripture, God has given certain commandments and admonitions concerning how we are to use our money and material possessions. For example, we are to glorify God in all that we do, including eating, drinking, and everything else in life. We are to honor God with our "substance," that is, with our possessions. We are to give sacrificially, joyfully, and in direct proportion to how God has provided for us.

But why should we give to a God we cannot even see? And why should we be willing to trust this God who has chosen to reveal Himself primarily through the Scriptures? It all goes back to faith. As the author of Hebrews wrote, ". . . whoever would approach him [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." So the question is, Do you believe that God exists? If so, do you really believe that He will reward those who earnestly seek Him? Do you really believe that God will keep His promises to you?

In the Old Testament, before the crop was harvested, people would take a sample that represented the best of the crop and offer it by faith in thanksgiving to God for His provision. This "first-fruits" offering was a reminder of God's ownership of everything and a way of saying, "Lord, we trust you to provide, even before we see what the harvest will really be like." In a similar manner, God says that we are to set aside part of what He has provided to us in direct proportion to how much He has provided for us.

In our chapel, Lori had a large chocolate cake prepared which she placed on a table at the front of the chapel. Beside the cake was a sign which read, "Family Income." Several individuals walked down the aisle of our chapel with signs such as "House Payment," "Car Payment," "Groceries," "Utilities," "Medical Bills," "School Expenses," and "Clothing." Each asked for a piece of cake which she gladly gave to them. Another individual with a sign that read, "Church," also approached the table, seeking a piece of cake. "Oh, no," was the reply, "there'll be a piece for you, but not just yet." Several times this was repeated with the same response. Finally, when Lori had given out all of the cake, "Church" came around again. "Oh, Church," said Lori, "You know that I had you in mind and that I was thinking of you. Here — take the crumbs that are left."

As you think of your "cake" of family income, what priority does God have? And as you think of your giving in the coming year, what priority does the Lord's work here at Divinity Lutheran Church have? Do you give God the first piece of "cake" from all that you have, or do you leave the crumbs on the platter as God's portion?

Today, as you consider the offering we are going to receive, and as you consider the commitment God would lead you to make in the coming year here at Divinity why not practice "first-fruits" giving by trusting God to provide all that you need. Respond to God's leading in your life with your faith goal for 2023.

And remember, "A Mighty Fortress is our God!"

May the peace of God . . .

#504 – A Mighty Fortress is Our God