

**“A Story of Faith”**

*“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36).*

Have you ever read the Ninety-five Theses? Well, if you have, then you know that they’re not very Lutheran. This makes sense because when Martin Luther posted the Ninety-five Theses on October 31, 1517, he was still a good Catholic, and nearly four years from the Diet of Worms, where he would take an official stand against a corrupt church and be excommunicated by order of the Pope.

Many of us grew up with the story of Luther’s bold protest against the abuses of indulgences, yet it bears repeating, because the case Luther made against indulgences gets to the heart of the Christian faith. When you examine the Ninety-five Theses, it’s easy to see the reason for the Reformation. The Catholic Church taught that, drawing on the treasury of merit accumulated by Jesus’ death on the cross and the virtues of the saints, indulgences mitigated the penalties associated with sins. Today, the Roman Catholic church refers to these penalties as penance, and in the Middle Ages, an indulgence was seen as a way to reduce the obligations connected with penance. Initially, indulgences were associated with almsgiving. In this way, they had a noble focus as the church used the proceeds from the sale of indulgences to care for the poor. But over time, the fundraising potential of indulgences became impossible to ignore, and by the early 1500s, Pope Leo X was overseeing one of the greatest capital campaigns in history. St. Peter’s Basilica was being rebuilt, and indulgences were the perfect vehicle for raising the funds needed for this massive building project.

To accomplish this work, the Pope deployed indulgence sellers who would travel throughout the empire pushing indulgences, and, like any salesman trying to meet projections, the tactics of these preachers became increasingly vile, and indulgences were tied to a reduced sentence in purgatory. To put it simply, the Roman Catholic Church was selling forgiveness, and the more you had to give, the more license you had to live apart from God’s Law. It seems unthinkable to us today, but this was the spiritual climate into which Luther exploded, and his message of reform was a jarring shock to the system. Listen to a few of Luther’s statements from the Ninety-Five Theses:

Indulgence preachers are in error who say that a man is absolved from every penalty and saved by papal indulgences... They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory... Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned together with their teachers... Any truly repentant Christian has the right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters... Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God’s wrath... Wherefore, the treasures of the gospel are nets with which one formerly fished for men of wealth... The treasures of indulgences are nets with which one now fishes for the wealth of men... Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest (world leader), build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of the poor believers?

For a Pope who was hellbent on building a world-class basilica, these were fighting words, and it didn’t take long for Luther to become public enemy number one.

As we think about the details surrounding this story, we need to pay close attention to the role money played in the Reformation. Paul wrote, “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil,” (1 Timothy 6:10), and while this seems obvious in the history of the Church, this word of caution is also very true today. Money and the false freedom it vows continue to tempt our world, and in the Church, we are not immune to this temptation. Selling forgiveness sounds absurd, and yet we are all inclined to accumulate and squander worldly wealth without any concern or qualm regarding its connection to God’s eternal kingdom.

For the last six weeks, we have been telling the story of God’s work among us. We’ve examined the history of our church body and our own congregation. We’ve celebrated stories of God with us and for us. We’ve heard the witness of brothers and sisters whose lives were transformed by the Gospel, and today, as we wrap up our sacred storytelling, we are confronted with the dangerous and delicate topic of money. In the first of Luther’s Ninety-five Theses, he says, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of

believers to be one of repentance.” And Brothers and Sisters, when so much of our lives is devoted to the pursuit of a paycheck and the things it provides, we can be sure that this call to repentance includes our attitudes about money.

When I say this, I’m not only talking about greed. That’s an obvious place where our hearts need conviction. I’m also talking about the fear with which money – or its perceived lack – controls and colors our lives. In the Church, this temptation is especially dangerous because we have been called to Kingdom work, and God, who created and owns all things, has instructed us to use earthly resources for eternal purposes. And yet, the fear of scarcity and its attack on our faith are sins of which we are all guilty.

A few weeks ago, in one of our storytelling sessions, I shared some of Emmanuel’s recent history. In that session, I recounted a time of financial trauma in 2004, when our congregation was facing a \$403,000 operating shortfall. To pay staff salaries and keep the lights on, we were forced to borrow \$400,000. \$300,000 came in the form of a loan from Lake City Bank, and the remaining balance was from two interest-free loans made from member families.

As a spiritually immature 30-something and a first-year pastor charged with overseeing Emmanuel’s Finance Committee, I was undone. I lived in perpetual panic, certain that this dire situation was going to end in disaster. But I kept coming to work, even as I doubted God’s plan, and the Lord continued to provide me with mentors who pointed to the promises of a God who is never short on cash. One of those gospel-filled guides was Don Hille.

Don was one of our Elders during those tenuous times, and as I wrung my hands and bemoaned our crisis, Don would gently remind me that it wasn’t my church or his church, it was Jesus’ Church, and He would provide for His Church. Don encouraged me to focus on preaching the Gospel, teaching the Word, and loving the people the Lord drew to our fellowship, and slowly, things began to stabilize. And suddenly the congregation began to grow. We were able to pay off our debts and begin to focus on the future that God was unveiling. But that future required funding, and not just the kind of funding that keeps the lights on. We were looking at a building addition that would provide fellowship space and new offices, and that would give us a youth room and enable access for all to use our facilities regardless of physical ability. We called the project “Building Faith,” and that was no joke, because as an organization just getting back on its feet, we faced a plan that was going to require a nearly \$3 million investment.

So on May 31, 2009, as the nation’s economy slumped and financial fears spiked, we came to our congregation with the Building Faith vision, and as we prepared for our Voters’ Meeting, Don asked if he could address the congregation about our finances. This is taken from a copy of Don Hille’s handwritten notes for his address:

Dear Members of Emmanuel: If you look at the northeast corner of our church foundation, you will see the cornerstone dated 1868. For 141 years, the Lord has provided people and resources at this location to proclaim his saving Word for all to hear. In 2008, he provided all that was needed for this ministry – in fact, he provided \$10,116 in excess of our ministry needs. Guess what? God is still providing for us (and) he is going to again. Certainly, we serve a God of abundance who has entrusted us with blessings too numerous to comprehend. It is now our privilege to use these gifts to proclaim Jesus Christ and to advance his Kingdom here on earth. In these uncertain economic times, I am humbled and yet privileged to report on how God has provided the financial support for this ministry. To some who may say, “Yes, but this is only the first four months of the year.” I say, “That’s true, but I can’t wait to see what God has in store for this congregation...” Our future is secure because Christ is our cornerstone.

Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Don’s words to the voters’ assembly in 2009 were the words of a free man. My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we have all been forgiven freely and completely by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as Scripture alone has promised. In this forgiveness, earned on the cross of Jesus, sins have been removed, faith has been created, and there is now nothing to fear. This is the gift of God, and today, my friends, you are free! Free in Christ Jesus to love and serve and give in ways that will exceed your wildest expectations, and in your free and faith-filled life, God will do amazing things and – without a doubt – the world will see Christ alone. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold