

**MESSAGE: "THE REFORMATION AND BEYOND," by Jim Stier**  
**Given at Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation on 10/24/2021**

The calendar suggests that today's discussion should revolve around Halloween and spirits but the idea of talking about Reformation Day, also October 31 arose in a rather round-about manner. Several weeks ago, I was sitting in my living room, multitasking, or rather multirelaxing. The tv was on while I was reading, a habit that has annoyed nearly everyone in my household for my entire life. I was reading an opinion piece by George Will, Washington Post columnist and wordsmith extraordinaire.

The op-ed was typical of that columnists' complaints: the loss of rigorous competition for the best jobs and the abandonment of standardized testing. In it, he quoted from economist Adrian Wooldridge's book, *The Aristocracy of Talent*. In his book, Wooldridge differentiates the aristocracy of birth, wealth and inheritance from that aristocracy gained through achievement and work.

Now I have little issue with meritocracy. Until today it has afforded me a safe comfortable seat in our pews and kept me out of this pulpit. But Wooldridge went on to write, "It is a virtue of meritocracy that it produces inequality. You need above average rewards to induce people to engage in self-sacrifice and risk taking."

I set the paper down and turned to the tv to get away from the subject but instead found a story of this aristocracy of talent turned on its head. The movie playing was *Compulsion*, based upon the true story of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, Chicago area friends in the 1920s. Before reaching the age of 20, Leopold completed his undergraduate degree, spoke five languages and received national recognition as an ornithologist. Loeb, also exceptionally intelligent became the University of Michigan's youngest graduate at age 17. Both planned on graduate studies.

Leopold was particularly fascinated by Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of supermen, interpreting them as transcendent individuals possessing extraordinary and unusual capabilities, whose superior intellects allowed them to rise above the laws and rules that bound the unimportant average populace. Leopold believed that he and Loeb were such individuals, and as such, by his interpretation of

Nietzsche's doctrines, they were not bound by any of society's normal ethics or rules. So, what kind of above average rewards did these two friends seek for their supreme intelligence and talent? The only reward they wanted was the satisfaction gained from eluding both suspicion and capture for a kidnapping and murder of most unspeakable description. The kidnapping and murder did take place but the two were within weeks apprehended and later imprisoned for their crimes.

But let's be fair. Getting away with murder is certainly not the reward that Will and Wooldridge had in mind as fair compensation for the "aristocracy of talent". The 1920s in America was a time of unfettered capitalism that spilled over into a moral hubris that apparently infected the minds of Leopold and Loeb. That period was followed by a mild reformation of sorts with new banking laws and the Hayes Commission, with its attempt to clean up Hollywood movies. The one reform was tepid at best and the other was a solution in search of a problem.

I will concede that too much time has been spent here on that sordid bit of history. It's taken us far from the intended subject but Will allows me a segue to the Reformation when he paraphrases Wooldridge saying, "Martin Luther's greatest contribution to modernity was not Protestantism but competition: Schism meant that faith factions had to 'improve their performance or lose market share'.

Martin Luther, you are probably aware is credited with the start of the Reformation when, on October 31, 1517 he nailed his 95 Theses on the door of All Saints' church in Wittenburg, Germany. Luther's criticisms centered largely on the church's selling of indulgences; part of what historians call the economy of salvation.

In this system, when Christians sin and confess, they are forgiven and no longer stand to receive eternal punishment in hell, but may still be liable to temporal punishment, meaning punishment meted out by ruling authorities as opposed to punishment from God. This punishment could be satisfied by the penitent's performing works of mercy. If the punishment is not satisfied during life, it needs to be satisfied in Purgatory, a place believed by Catholics to exist between Heaven and Hell. Through purchase of an indulgence, defined here as a favor or privilege,

this punishment could be lessened. This led to the popular saying, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

I don't fully understand how this economy of salvation worked, but it sounds like it started out rather innocently. The church, after all was quite clear in that the final resting place for your soul was determined by confession and not some quantifiable system. Sort of like the cuss jar where you put money after getting caught using foul language. Or that highly discounted insurance policy with so many exemptions as to render it useless, save for the temporary peace of mind.

Under abuses of the system of indulgences, clergy benefited by selling indulgences and the pope gave official sanction in exchange for a fee. Popes are empowered to grant plenary indulgences, which provide complete satisfaction for any remaining temporal punishment due to sins, and these were purchased on behalf of people believed to be in Purgatory.

Perhaps the last straw for Luther was in 1515 when Pope Leo X declared that the revenue from the sale of all indulgences was to be sent to Rome to finance the construction of St. Peter's Basilica. To boost sales, a new and improved indulgence was offered that applied to almost any sin, including adultery and theft. A Johann Tetzel was commissioned by the Pope to preach and offer indulgence in 1517 and his campaign in cities near Wittenberg drew many Wittenbergers to travel to these cities and purchase them, since sales had been prohibited in Wittenberg itself and other Saxon cities.

Luther became especially concerned when his parishioners, returning from purchasing Tetzel's indulgences, claimed they no longer needed to repent and change their lives in order to be forgiven of sin. Indulgences had another effect that rippled through Europe at the time. Political rulers had an interest in controlling indulgences because local economies suffered when money for indulgences left a given territory. Talk about a trade deficit! Maybe that's why Luther is praised by the conservative economist Wooldridge. Luther saw the church's tremendous influence morph into political power with a taxing authority it exercised in the form of indulgences. Money spent on taxes was not available to purchase goods and services and supposedly bad for the economy. And anyone who preached against taxes was by definition a hero to the likes of George Will and Adrian Wooldridge.

Luther's theses were intended to begin a debate among academics, not a popular revolution. It was common at the time for students of theology to post their writings on the doors of buildings where they attended classes or on nearby kiosks. Usually, they were meant and taken as questions or theories to be explored rather than direct challenges to authority. The intent was for the topics to be taken up later for vigorous debate at social gatherings. Picture young, caped divinity students seated around a rough sawn table in a 16<sup>th</sup> century tavern lit only by sparse oil lamps, the arguments growing louder each time the tankards are refilled with ale. Not unlike the literary buffs on 1950s college campuses debating the writings of James Joyce, only this time they are debating the apostles, as they should have and as divinity students should today.

The 95 Theses, also called a Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences spread like wildfire throughout Europe. But Luther was already in damage control and backpedaled a little bit. He wrote to the Archbishop of Mainz, under whose authority the indulgences were being sold. In the letter, Luther addresses the archbishop out of a loyal desire to alert him to the pastoral problems created by the indulgence sermons.

My research did not reveal that actual letter, but it's description, to me least, suggests a clever and mildly innocent ruse on the part of Luther. It was as if he was telling the archbishop, "You have priests out there playing fast and loose with indulgences. What will happen when the Pope hears of this? What can we do about it?"

Luther's message that he was on the same side as the church was not convincing. A review of the theses does not appear to support his claim that he wasn't out to stir things up. Consider number 13: "The dying are freed by death from all penalties, are already dead as far as the canon laws are concerned, and have a right to be released from them." Number 82: Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church. The former reason would be most just; the latter most trivial." Or number 86: "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than the money of poor believers?"

So, even though something may be lost in the translation from German to English and without complete understanding of the tone of his statements, it's hard to imagine that Luther did not intend to issue a direct challenge to the church.

Luther was not immediately silenced. Over the next few years, he was allowed to preach and publish while the church countered with its own position. A top theologian was commissioned to write a lengthy disputation against Luther's argument. 800 copies of the disputation were printed and sent to Wittenberg but university students seized the copies from the bookseller and burned them.

Under the pope's authority, Thomas Cajetan of Augsburg summoned Luther to defend himself against charges of heresy. Luther stood by his writings but Cajetan remained firm. Luther asked for the case to be reviewed by university theologians but the request was denied. He appealed to the pope but was met with an order to recant. Luther burned the order and was finally excommunicated in 1521.

Shortly thereafter he went into hiding and in 1525 he married a former nun, Katherine of Bora, with whom he had six children. Visitors to the Luther household reported that Katherine was a skillful household manager and a partner in the theological conversations. Luther's role in the Reformation after 1525 was that of theologian, adviser and facilitator but the new Protestant churches that he helped establish were essentially pursued without his direct involvement.

During Reformation-era confessionalization, Western Christianity adopted different confessions – Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Anabaptist and Unitarian among others.

On the tenth anniversary of the day Luther posted his theses he gathered with friends and raised glasses of beer to commemorate the "trampling out of indulgences". Freed from any official title to protect, he became increasingly loose in his comments, sometimes strident and shrill. Perhaps it was after a few drinks with friends, he called the pope the antichrist and said Jews should be expelled and their synagogues burned.

At about the same time Henry VIII divorced his first wife and started the Anglican church, German ruler Philip, Landgrave of Hesse was facing a similar challenge.

He sought Luther's advice regarding the possibility of entering a second marriage without divorcing the first wife. Sources conflict on how much Luther tried to discourage the planned secret marriage, but Luther did note in his response that patriarchs of the Old Testament had been married to more than one wife and that, as a special dispensation, polygamy was still possible.

So, it is then, that even reformers need reforming from time to time. And why shouldn't they? No one is perfect. Even when there is consensus on any given subject that we finally got it right, that doesn't mean we should stop striving to improve. Science is always digging deeper and looking further to understand the meaning of existence. What is it about religion that encourages conformity to some ancient texts deemed to be not only inerrant but, once defined are no longer subject to redefinition? I suggest it is because many religious leaders nowadays state their beliefs first and then go looking for biblical cover instead of the other way around. These are caretakers for a faith they care nothing about.

Reform, as I understand it from Webster's 20<sup>th</sup> Century Unabridged is to "correct or make better by removing faults." It does not make reference to restoration or a return to something's original creation. Yet we treat religion as if it were some grand Victorian mansion in need of preservation, right down to using the same tools employed by the original artisans. If there is no need of further reformation, why are we not now in paradise, free of all want and guilt?

The ancient Roman god Janus is symbolized by a head with two faces, one looking forward and the other looking behind. Janus is the god of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, duality, doorways, passages, frames and endings. A modern definition and one that I favor is that Janus symbolized change and transitions such as the progress of past to future, from one condition to another, and young people's growth to adulthood. He represented time, because he could see into the past with one face and into the future with the other. Janus was the middle ground between barbarism and civilization, rural and urban space, youth and adulthood.

This appeals to me because it suggests that there is plenty of our history worth honoring, preserving and emulating while at the same time there is plenty of change that could improve our future. I don't want to live in a world where

nothing is sacred any more than I want to live in a world where everything is sacred.

So, if you are a biblical literalist and think the reformation was sufficient and complete, here are a few verses you might consider for modern application:

Regarding income inequality, Deuteronomy 15:11 “ For there will never cease to be poor in this land. Therefore, I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land’.

Or a graduated tax, as suggested by Mark 12:41-44 “Jesus sat down opposite the treasury. And saw how the multitude cast money into the treasury. Many of the rich cast in much. A poor widow came, and she cast in two small coins. He said to his disciples, ‘this poor widow gave more than the others, for they gave out of their abundance, but she, out of her poverty gave all that she had to live on.’

Revelations, the last book of the bible is supposed to be where we are forewarned of coming events with signs to watch for – where more truths will be revealed. When asked what distinguishes UUs from the other faiths grown out of the Reformation, I heard one minister say, “Revelations is not closed”, meaning possibly that even more truths will be revealed upon further searching.

So maybe the Reformation should not be closed either. Perhaps that “meritocracy” spoken of earlier can become, through will, labor and determination an “aristocracy” of humanity, guided by the seven principles and with love as its currency.