

Solomon's Temple \ Reformation Sunday  
(29Oct17) 1Kings5:1-5, 8:1-13

We didn't learn anything from the Reformation if we haven't realized that we get to challenge authority.

That starts with Solomon, whose authority is in the aura of being the wealthiest King in the Bible, allegedly the wisest, and the greatest lover. Whether or not any of that is true, that glamorous aura might obscure or overwhelm some serious difficulties.

Certainly this temple of his was amazing, attracting distant admirers like the Queen of Sheba to the small, fledgling Kingdom. The descriptions are fancy and expansive, with lavish detail and huge scale.

But, for the first challenge point, there's barely concealed harshness that this project took coercion. It wasn't just the countless animals sacrificed at the dedication that had to give up their lives for this project. Listen to this description of the work force (with "work" and "force" being appropriate terms): *"King Solomon conscripted forced labor out of all Israel...He sent them to the Lebanon, 10,000 a month in shifts...Solomon also had 70,000 laborers and 80,000 stonecutters in the hill country, besides Solomon's 3,300 supervisors...having charge of the people who did the work. At the King's command, they quarried out great, costly stones."* (5:13-18)

Although it here labels their labor as conscripted—meaning not voluntary—in Hebrew it's even stronger, as the only other time using the same word as the workforce under Pharaoh in Egypt, whose brutal demands became the whole reason God was striving to set the people free in the first place! Here in the Promised Land, it may be their own King and a building for their own God, but still this was harsh and demanding work, called a heavy yoke and

discipline with whips (1Kgs12:11). It may be no surprise the Kingdom fractured after Solomon died, since people hated such leadership.

Besides taking their lives, we should presume steep taxes took the people's property. And not just for religion directly. Subsequent verses say the temple was under construction for seven years, but Solomon's palace for 13 years. Maybe he put priority on finishing the temple first, but it's likely the extra time shows more dedication to his own dwelling than God's dwelling.

That title of "dwelling of God" may be my biggest gripe with Solomon. His final words of dedication said, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. [But] I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever." The nerve of this guy! He admits God has chosen to be in mystery, obscured in transient clouds. But mighty King Solomon is higher than almighty God to declare God instead will be placed under house arrest. It almost literally is putting God in a box, in this case saying that God would be in the temple that kept confined the Ark of the Covenant, that box of God since Solomon says so. With the fact that it's called "Solomon's Temple," it mislocates and misattributes faith, distracting from God by pointing to a self-absorbed human.

If we don't like that, we could challenge authority and argue with Solomon by confessing with St. Stephen (Acts 7:48) and the words of one of our communion hymns that God does not live in a house made by human hands. But other than reasserting our faith in that way, we don't have the chance actually to correct Solomon, so long in the past.

So let's zoom ahead 2466 years from the completion of the temple in 949 BC to the start of the Reformation in 1517. We hold a parallel today of Luther confronting the Solomon of his time, his challenge to church hierarchy, with high

and mighty claiming or even usurping the authority of God, misattributing and mischaracterizing God while abusing the people. Their greatest priority was their own prestige and wealth and satisfaction, even when that came at the expense of common folk and of God's will in the world.

Almost exactly 500 years ago, Martin Luther started an argument with the most powerful authority of his time. He pointed out errors, fallibilities, the ways this institution was not only going astray but misleading others. Though we give Luther almost mythic superhero status and identify him as changing the world, we do well to remember that Luther wasn't in it for himself. If Solomon was trying to get credit for building a temple, we cannot say Luther was trying to build a church. His faithful desire was to correct what was wrong, to speak rightly of God, to help hurting lives.

As I've been reading through the 95 Theses in these weeks, marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of when Luther started this discussion, I've been especially struck by number 46. Against the practice of buying slips of paper that essentially paid for a reduced penalty, as if God could be bought off, and with that idea hanging as a terrifying eternal threat over people's heads, Luther argued in thesis 46 this: "Christians are to be taught that unless they have more than they need, they are bound to keep what is necessary for their own families, and by no means to squander it on pardons."

The general perception is that the Reformation was about theological arguments, indulgences and purgatory and how God offered forgiveness and what preachers were supposed to say, that kind of thing. That sense makes the Reformation mostly about people's relationship to God, in a scholastic and theoretical way. But with this thesis 46, Luther rightly understands that our relationship with God is never separate

from our relationships to each other. It's always about real lives. He says you can't take people's money and pretend it's for a higher purpose than feeding their household. Our care for each other is what is right. This is what God wants.

And that is the opposite of Solomon taking people away from their families, taking away their property, taking their purpose and pointing toward the temple as where they would find God. Luther said the construction of a basilica in Rome would not serve best or more to the glory of God, that God's glory and purpose and presence is within lives like yours.

From that, we might consider how we continue living into this Reformation heritage today, what it means that we live as people with Luther's name applied to us. A phrase from Luther that the ELCA has picked up on is that we have a "living, daring confidence in God's grace." That word confidence is important. It means we live with faith, trusting. We are people who rely on the promised assurance that God is on the side of life, that God is not best found residing in the halls of power or in the loftiest and fanciest places, and that when we struggle against what steals life then God fights by our side.

Some of the obscurity of God that Solomon thought needed to be changed by putting God in a fancy temple was in this astonishing and mystifying word that God chooses to be with you, to care about your life, that you don't need to do something different to ascend to God or earn your way into God's presence, because God is passionate about a life like yours.

And like your neighbor's. The vital first core of the Reformation is that God loves you. And the second is that God loves your neighbor. This gets to the "daring" part of living with confidence. For the sake of God's love for his neighbors, Luther had to stand up to power and

confront authority, had to declare that it was wrong to starve a family under pious pretenses.

As Lutherans, we're called to confront the Solomons who are stealing life from us and our neighbors. Pastor Heather Hayward from St. Luke's called it "putting the Protest back in Protestant." There's something to that. It may be resisting wars or demanding better health care or helping families to have the food they need or, as Luther said in Thesis 46, how we stop the lures of squandering precious resources on worthless commodities, against this mega-modern indulging lie that we can buy our way to happiness. In that system, we might need to protest against notions that people don't matter, are expendable, or that any of God's creation can be treated as if it doesn't have value, as if God's presence and blessing are more intensively found elsewhere. We need to fight against false demands set on people's lives and to denounce empty hopes that turn lives away from the truth of God's constant and abundant blessing.

Those are huge challenges against the fiercest powers and most entrenched beliefs existing today. But Luther again is a good example. He didn't set out to topple an institution. He raised a question about one small practice, the concern of indulgences. From that focus everything else arose and God's goodness was set loose. I believe we can expect the same.

With that confidence in God's gracious, liberating mission, I want to conclude by admitting I've set Solomon up as a bit of foil in this sermon, pointing out plenty that was negative and flawed. But there is an aspect of his grand celebration that I don't simply want to discard.

Some Reformers after Luther tore apart their churches, thinking any display, any fine artwork, any shiny object, any ostentatious

display was problematic, idolatrous, against God. Luther didn't agree. Another of the 95 Theses, number 55, highlights how valuable—of what rich value—our religious celebrations can be. He says that if insignificant things in life are celebrated by a bell, then whenever we hear the gospel, the word promising God with us in grace and love, it is worth celebrating with 100 bells, 100 processions, 100 ceremonies.

Solomon rightly threw a big party, because we have a God who cares for us, abides with us, wants always the best for you and your neighbor. Today, in continuity with that right understanding of Solomon, with the faithfulness of Luther, with the generations before and behind us, with the song of all creation, we join brass and guitars and pianos, and other Protestants and protesting voices, and the UCC and Catholics and all who celebrate God's goodness, knowing and trusting that more than any structure or building or wealth or earthly power, we proclaim and confidently keep living together with the word that this with-us God ensures the kingdom's ours forever.