

“Protestants” Acts 11:19-30

In just two days many churches will remember and celebrate the 500th Anniversary of a non-descript German Monk nailing to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany 95 “issues” he was having with the church, which was a university custom meant to spark debate but in truth became the spark that ignited, what we now call the Reformation. As Bruce Shelley of “Church History in Plain Language” writes, On October 31, 1517 “the wild boar invaded the vineyard.” That “wild boar” was none other than Martin Luther and the Vineyard was the Roman Catholic Church.

Luther was born in 1483, the son of a Saxon miner, and who had every intention of becoming a lawyer. But while walking home one day a bolt of lightning hit the ground and terrified Luther so, that he called out to St. Anne (the Patron Saint of Miners) saying, “St Anne save me! And I’ll become a monk.” Much to his parent’s dismay, the Roman Church’s disgust and the Reformed Church’s delight, Luther kept his vow. He became a dedicated monk even saying in later years, “I kept the rule so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his sheer ‘monkery’ it was I.” But there was something Luther loved more than the rituals of the church and it was the Word of God. The “Bible” became for Luther that which, above all other things, one must adhere and submit – but not only he but the church itself. A “new” revolutionary idea arose within Luther in his reading and study in 1515 when pondering Paul’s words to the Romans he came upon these words, “the just shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:17) Such words may or may not be too “alarming” to our modern ears but for the time and the people of that period they were radical words, protestant words even. This verse in Romans became the first point of contradiction between the Luther and the church which was “How is a person made right with God?” Luther’s finding in Romans and later Ephesians was in direct opposition to the church’s understanding that good works alone makes us right with God. But Luther knew he was not good and understood he could never be good enough but he knew someone Who was. For Luther salvation came from grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone and “not by works, lest we boast.” (Eph 2:8-9) But Luther was also confronted with the corruption of the church at that time and found the answer, in scripture to another problem in the church of “Where does religious authority lie?” and “What is the church?” Armed with this new found faith one of the first people Luther confronted was a Dominican Monk, like himself, by the name of John Tetzel who in 1515 was on a “fund raising” preaching circuit in Germany for St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. In exchange for a contribution Tetzel boasted he would provide donors with an indulgence – basically a “free ticket” to Heaven. Give a little get a little. Give a lot and you get a lot, even Heaven. To Luther this kind of thinking was not only bad theology but an act that was in opposition to the fourth and final question of “The Essence of Christian living.” And with that Luther penned his complaints, his pages of

complaints, 95 in all, and nailed them to the church door. It was truly an act that defines who we are, the denomination that we are apart, and that name we are called, Protestant or protestant.

(Background from Bruce Shelley's "Church History in Plain Language")

But being a Protestant or protestant has a history going back even further than 499 years and 350 days. In fact being a protestant is as old as the "church" itself. We sometimes forget that the original church was a protestant church. At a glance it may not sound like a "good" thing – being a protester. Protesting sounds more like what high schoolers do with their parents after they have been told their curfew for Saturday night. But protesting, at least in the Biblical sense, is not about bellyache, gripe or grievance, as are some of the synonyms but about challenge, dissent, outcry, question and revolt against that which God is against. (And that's important) And that's the point. A protest, therefore, is about standing up for injustice and unfairness. Protesting is not about simply "marching" but "standing with" those who suffer injustice and live with unfairness. It's about remembering the forgotten and being a loving disciple just like Agabus.

His story is brief, very brief, and we really hear nothing of him after this one incident in Acts 11 but it was no less impactful than what happened in Wittenberg some 1500 years or so later. Now understand what happened in our lesson was not the first time such a thing occurred. We've already looked at Acts 2 and Acts 4 which spoke of these "same" things so we shouldn't be surprised by Acts 11. Situations and circumstances happen in the world and the church is not left untouched. Rural communities no longer have the number of families they once did so attendance drops, programs cease, finances dry up and the doors close. City churches are found in prime locations but there is no longer a neighbourhood around them or those who do live nearby do not share a common faith. Tornadoes and hurricanes and famine (as was the case in our story this morning) have the same consequences on the church as local home owners. And such problems require a dramatic solution. Agabus predicted the problem of a famine but it was the disciples who came up with the solution – "relief would be sent." I know it doesn't sound like a "protest," a march to Judea with placards proclaiming things like, "Down with Famine," but it is a protest all the same. It is a protest because protests are in reality acts to promote the Kingdom of God. As Will Willimon writes, "In a few short verses Luke has given us a vivid picture of the true church. A church empowered by the Spirit is one energized to reach out to the furthestmost bounds, to proclaim the good news of what has happened for all people in Christ." (Source: Interpretation: Acts, William Willimon) And this was no local act but a global one. This was not simply caring for your own but caring for the other – strangers, most likely, in a place where few had travelled and fewer knew. This was the global church protesting together, protesting against a world to say that this is not how God's Kingdom was supposed to look like.

It's not that the church is no longer a protesting church it's just that much of the church no longer knows what we are supposed to be protesting. We are great on Facebook™ to protest the political parties of whom we did NOT vote for in the last election or the one we would NOT vote for, if we lived on the other side of the border. We like to protest them calling them all kinds of nasty names and accusing them of doing all kinds of things. We like to protest in church when things don't go our way so we stomp away angry. We protest when we feel like our "way of life" is being altered by those who look, sound or even believe differently from us. We protest that our Christian country or influence is being weakened and if only we could only go back to "the good ole days." So it's not that we are not familiar with being protestants but are those really the things what makes us Protesting Christians or Protestants? We are a Protestant Church, a denomination that arose from a protest: A church that protested that salvation was based on works; a church that protested against the belief that anyone was needed to mediate for us, other than Jesus. But even more Protestants protested that the church was to be a safe haven for all and those within were to look after those outside. To be "present" with those the world has forgotten and be the "voice" of those who did not have a voice and reach out and care for the widow, the orphan and the immigrant. This is what it meant and still means to be a protestant. I don't believe it to be happenstance that Protestant was the name given to courageous reformers and could have easily been a name given to the early church as well.

So in imitation when we see those in our society who are without, we heed the words of scripture and share what we have – to make sure "relief is sent". Not generous by choosing who is and who is not deserving but simply sharing what we have. This is what it means to be a protestant. When we recognize that all are not equal under the law and there is injustice for some then we speak up, no matter if those who are being treated unfairly might believe differently than we do. This is what it means to be a protestant. When we look around and we see those who seem to be forgotten - like those in prison, living in group homes or wandering the street we don't blame them for their situation, we don't tell them what they need to do to fix the situation, we simply help. This is what it means to be a protestant. When we have opportunities to show kindness in a kindles world, show love in a loveless world, offer help with those who receive no help we are in fact being protestants. When we consider ways to try as a church to reach out into our community, think of ways we can take the gospel and good news into neighbourhoods we don't necessarily look for those who look like us, sound like us, think like us or even believe like us because we are protestants, this is who we are! And yes we come from a great line of protesters who did not simply come on the scene beginning in 1517 with pieces of paper nailed to a door but nail pierced hands who associated Himself with whores and tax collectors and sinners alike. Yes, God, Himself was in fact the first protestant when he entered the world not as a King in a Castle but a baby in a manger, not as a warrior on a horse but a

Rabbi on a donkey, not as a Saviour willing to die for the good but giving his life for those who were not good enough. Yes, Jesus was the first protestant and he left this world saying, "Take my message everywhere, but even more share it, and live it out with everyone, absolutely everyone."

A friend dropped into the office just the other day just to visit. As we were wrapping up he asked me a great question that I wasn't able to answer. I mean there are a lot of questions I can't answer but this one took me by surprise because I felt I should be able to answer it, expected by you to answer it. I felt embarrassed to be honest. His question was, "Do we have a strategic plan for KesPres - you know, with all the growth that is happening and will continue to happen in the area?" I smiled and then gave a long awkward pause. The community is growing, growing quickly and how are we, part of a declining denomination, going to reach out to our community? Although not stated the implications were obvious and fair, "What are you going to do to grow this church." I'm not sure what I mumbled to be honest but I have a feeling I gave the "typical" clergy response which was something about good programming and practical and uplifting worship and so on. And then we shook hands and he left. That excellent question has been on my mind since then. But now I now have an answer, the answer I should have given. I do have a strategic plan and to be honest it's no different than Jesus' strategic plan he gave to the disciples. Our strategic plan is to go out and make disciples. Not to send just your ministers out to make disciples but for you to go out from here and make disciples. That was Jesus' simple plan he gave to his disciples and look what happened – we are here today because of what they did. You are responsible wherever God has placed you – on your street, at your place of work, in the supermarket line, at Club 55, the local rink, the community pool, wherever you are the strategic plan is for us, together, to be kingdom of God. And the first we are to reach are those Eugene Peterson calls "the kingdom's first citizens." When James wrote, He said "(Jesus) chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges." (James 2:5) We are to protest for them, to take the Kingdom to them first. I wish I would have said to my friend last Wednesday. Let us pray...