

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart”

Proverbs 3:1-6

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On October 31, 1517, tradition has it that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. The posting of the 95 theses on the door of the church, which was a Roman Catholic Church, obviously begs a theological question. “What were the 95 theses about?” At the risk of being too brief in summary, here is what you can find online. “The 95 Theses were largely written to oppose the selling of indulgences to the people in order to reduce the time their loved ones spent in purgatory. The indulgences trade was authorized by the Archbishop of Mainz and Madgeburg, who was deeply in debt due to his purchase of the bishopric of Mainz.” In other words, Luther did not believe you could buy forgiveness, either for your loved ones or for yourself. Forgiveness is not something you buy. It is the free gift of God. The nailing of the Theses to the church door in Wittenberg not only raises a theological question, it also raises a logistical question. How the heck do you nail 95 theses to the door of the church.

I doubt many, if any of you, can read these 95 theses from where you sit. I printed them out in 20-point type, but if you really want people to be able to read them, you probably have to go a lot bigger. At 20-point type this filled 14 pages. Who knows how thick and coarse the paper was back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I have a replica of the King James Bible, which was printed in 1611. It is at least five times as big, if not bigger than this bible in my hand. If the 95 theses were five times bigger than these 14 pages I hold before you, and Martin Luther was intent on putting those theses on the church door in Wittenberg, how the heck do you nail 95 theses to the church door? Not with a thumbtack. Nope. I don't think you are going to get by with a box nail or a sinker nail. Good luck if you try a finishing nail or a pin nail. You're going to at least need something like a connector nail or a pole barn nail, a strong and sturdy nail that can bear the load. Shoot, you might even need a masonry nail or a piece of hardware along the lines of a brad nail, you know what I

mean, a nail made of 18-gauge steel wire. If you try to nail 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, you better bring your A game, or you will never be able to survey your finished project and say with satisfaction, “Nailed it!”

In fact, I wonder if Martin Luther might have felt like Chief Brody when he looked at that door, his unwieldy pile of papers, and whatever nail he brought along with him. I know you New Englanders, especially from a coastal community, I know you remember Chief Brody. He was one of the three men aboard that seafaring vessel named the Orca, tracking down the gigantic shark in *Jaws*, the blockbuster movie from the summer of 1975. After coming face to face with all the mammoth teeth threatening to devour that undersized vessel and the three men on board, Chief Brody said to Captain Quint, “You’re gonna need a bigger boat.” Picture poor Martin Luther, weighed down with multiple pages of parchment, a nail clenched in his teeth and a hammer in his pocket, eyeballing that door in Wittenberg, looking from his pile of papers to the tiny nail in his teeth, and shaking his head hopelessly as he says to himself, “I’m gonna need a bigger nail!”

Well, as you can tell, since we are celebrating Reformation Sunday this morning, somehow Martin Luther solved his dilemma and nailed those theses to the door in Wittenberg. I’m happy for Luther, but it doesn’t help me with the dilemma I face. You see, along with Reformation Sunday, we are celebrating “Kirkin ‘O’ the Tartans” this morning, and we have been asked to bring items that have been important to our journey of faith. I give thanks to God that on my journey of faith, there are countless items that have been meaningful to me, important to me, significant to me, and incredibly special to me. I’m so glad for each and every one of these items and memories. I wouldn’t give up any of them. But how in the heck am I going to nail them all to the door, ala Martin Luther?

I don’t even have the item that is first on my list. In the summer of 1980, I was hired to be a summer intern at my home church in Hanford, California. I had no experience, no training, no background in working with children and youth. My home church must have been pretty desperate to put me on the front lines. I either impressed someone in our

small church with my amazing abilities, or they looked at me as I flailed and floundered and felt sympathy, but whatever the motive, somebody gave me a little gift. It was a plaque. A tiny, keepsake type plaque, that you could set on a desk. On the plaque was a verse from the bible. The verse was from Proverbs, Proverbs 3:5,6. In honor of that tiny plaque and the encouragement it brought me so many years ago, our scripture for the sermon this morning is Proverbs 3, verses five and six. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge God and he will make your paths straight."

Although that small plaque with those precious words has been lost in the shuffle of moves that have taken me from California to Texas and now New England, I'll never forget that first little keepsake. Over the years there have been many. Over the years there have been more than I can count. I was only able to gather together a small portion of the many items of remembrance, and even with just these few I feel like Martin Luther, making my way to the door, my teeth clamped on a nail, hammer in my hand, looking at these many and varied items, and thinking, "I'm gonna need a bigger nail."

I hope you need a big nail when you think of the remembrances of God's actions and blessings in your life. I hope through offering my thoughts that my remembrances will lead you to reflect on your remembrances. And friends, I hope they are many.

The teens from our church in Houston attended a retreat. The retreat was with other youth groups, some 200 youth. On that retreat, a girl got up to give her testimony. She was a high school student. It turned out her mom had died recently. With tears she told of how alone she felt. And then she told how God had come to her and comforted her. As she was telling her story a butterfly flew into the room. A butterfly really is an awesome part of God's creation, with those spreading wings and bright colors. Imagine a young girl who has lost her mother talking to a group of her peers and saying somehow, someway, in God's goodness and grace she had found comfort. And as she is speaking of God's comfort and care, this butterfly is circling around the room. While all the other kids were listening intently to the girl, they were also watching the butterfly. Slowly the butterfly made its way to where the

girl was talking. Then it landed on her. And it stayed. The butterfly is a symbol of resurrection. From what I heard, everybody who left the meeting place that day left quietly, with reverence. Everyone left that morning in grateful awe. I wasn't there that day. But so many times I have experienced the butterfly effect, as God's tender care and steadfast love circles a room, searching intently for a heart that is broken, a soul that is wounded, and finding that hungering heart, the butterfly of God's love gently comes to rest.

You might recognize some of these things I hold or stories I tell. I never apologize for telling the same story multiple times. Ever since I started reading the bible, there have only been four gospels. There has yet to be a new edition with a fifth or sixth gospel. Just four. We read them over and over again, and hopefully over and over and over again. We treasure those stories. I treasure each and every remembrance I have, and I work hard to remember these remembrances.

I heard a story years ago about starfish. Since that time, I have heard the starfish story quite frequently. It has been told so often, it almost got to the point where some people say, "Oh no, not that old starfish story." It has to do with a beach that is littered with starfish that have washed ashore and are dying. If someone would throw them back in the water they would live, but there were thousands of starfish on the sand and so it was just not realistic to save them all, which in some ways made it easy to not even help one, since saving one would hardly make a difference. And yet there was one person walking along the seashore, bending down, and one by one, picking up the starfish and throwing them back in the water. Someone said to her, "Why are you doing that? There are thousands of starfish dying on this beach. What difference does it make if you pick up one starfish?" Holding a starfish in her hand, she said, "It makes a difference for this one." Then after throwing that starfish in the sea, she bent down and picked up another. A guy named Steve came to our church years ago. He stopped by one day and the next thing you know he was a fixture. He got real involved. Just an amazing guy. We learned his wife Sandra never came to church because she was dying of cancer. After his wife died, Steve was talking to me, about how he and Sandra would listen to audio tapes of our church service. Out of

the blue he said, “Her favorite sermon was the one about the starfish.” I guess when you are the one lying on the beach, lost and alone, suffering and seeking help, to know there is someone out there, someone named Jesus who is in the business of picking up starfish, it makes a difference. But can you see my problem. How do you nail a butterfly and a starfish to the door?

Talking about old stories, here’s a gift a neighbor gave me years ago. Not even a member of our church. Just a neighbor. It’s a story about footprints in the sand, and how at our lowest moments, when there is just one set of footprints, Jesus is carrying us through our times of sadness and sorrow. When there is one set of footprints, those footprints belong to Jesus.

Many of the items I have saved relate to the bible. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” I have that here. The teens have that on the wall in their room downstairs. Pat Rychlec had that verse on her heart. “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua spoke those words thousands of years ago. For many of us, those words have found the way to one of the walls in our home. I know quite a few of you have your wall of witness, the scriptures you have clung to in times of trial, the scriptures that give you hope. Just this week in bible study Joyce Stahl quoted the same Proverb I am using this morning. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge God and he will make your paths straight.” Nancy Schilke recounted her reliance on Psalm 121, “I lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord.” In a related way, scriptures have inspired hymns.

We used to play a youth group game where in a big room we would throw out a beach ball and the kids would bat it back and forth, back and forth, from person to person. I bet if I threw out an inflated hymnal or if we played bible ball, the game would go on for hours. I know you have favorite hymns. We come to the garden, we sing, “It is well with my soul,” we say, “For God so loved the world” and we rejoice in the Lord always...and then again, we say rejoice. Hymns and songs and scriptures. 95 Theses indeed. When we start on bible verses

and songs of faith, we easily pass a hundred and then some. But again, I ask you, I implore you, do you see my dilemma. I'm definitely going to need a bigger nail.

This next little thing doesn't look like much. It is a card that has the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm on it. I probably could tack this to the door with no problem. But, in my years as a pastor, I have received hundreds of these cards, often with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm printed on them. I get them when I conduct a funeral. I have to include this. Where would we be without the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. I'll tack one on the door, but I cannot even imagine the size of nail I would need...for all the times I have turned to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

One of my favorite preachers was telling a story about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. His name is Tony Campolo. During the 1980s, Tony got called on to do a funeral. The funeral was for a gay man. Tony showed up at the graveside, and most of the people attending were the man's friends. Most of those attending were gay men. They didn't gather close. They spread out. They were wary. Many times they had heard preachers condemn them for being gay men. They were ready for another dose of judgment. Tony shared some words about God's love. He said a prayer. He asked God to hold this man who had died in his arms of eternal care. Tony was done. He was getting ready to leave, when one of the gay men who had come to the funeral said, "Hey preacher, do you know the verse about God loving the world?" Tony said yes, and he quoted John 3:16. Another man said, "What about the one where God promises never to leave us?" Tony told them that one, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." What about our names being printed on his hands. The gay men wanted to hear about God's eternal care. Finally, one said, "What about the Lord being our shepherd?" Tony said the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

In the 1980s, these gay men were on the outside. They didn't feel welcomed in the church. I'm so glad we are not in the 1980s anymore. I am so glad this is not the 1980s in terms of welcoming and including all the ones who were once kept out, ones who found the door of the church shut to them. LGBTQ...welcome. But there is always the danger that some will seek to shut the door once again, so along with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, I will nail a rainbow flag to my door, a symbol that I want to be part of a Christian community that welcomes all, so that all can receive the

blessing of the church, so that all can share their many and wonderful gifts freely and fully. Oh my goodness, am I ever going to need a bigger nail!

You bet I need a big nail. I have a teddy bear...hundreds of teddy bears, bears that have traveled near and far, bears that were taken last Sunday when thousands of people waited patiently in line to pay their respects to the Chris DiPaola family, bears that were delivered and mailed during COVID, bears that showed up when families lost a loved one. All of the bears have this little sign that says a church named Dunn's Corners remembers, a church named Dunn's Corners cares, a church named Dunn's Corners loves, and a church named Dunn's Corners is praying.

A lot of these remembrances you can buy. You buy a teddy bear. You can buy a glass figure or a keepsake. Many can be bought. Some are handmade. Our daughter Carlee married an artist, a wonderful man named Nate. He helped awaken her artistic side. She sent me this. It kind of has it all. The words say, "How great thou art." One of my favorite hymns, a hymn that has been with me on lofty mountains, in times of reverent worship, even out on the Sea of Galilee. How great thou art. And the words are imposed over the shape of the cross.

I love this work of art so much I brought it to church one day to show the kids. I was in a bit of a hurry. I set it on the roof of my car, loaded all my other supplies for the day, set my cup of coffee in the cupholder, and hurriedly backed up and then hit the road. About ten minutes later Julie called and said she found something in the street outside our house. I had left this on the roof. I drove away. It fell to the ground. It broke. As she told me that, my heart broke. These remembrances, they mean the world. And I had hastily damaged something precious. Jeanne Pietraallo heard about this. She asked if she could take this with her. A few days later she returned it to me. She repaired it. Now it means even more. That is the case with each of these signs, each of these symbols. They grow on us. Our experience with them deepens and becomes richer, more poignant, more powerful, and yes, more precious. They become so precious we seek to find a way to nail them to the door, to capture these memories, to implant them, to

imprint them, to impress them on our hearts. To do that, we really do need a big nail.

It just so happens a few years ago I was searching for a big nail, a really big nail. I was preaching a sermon for the Weekapaug Chapel, and I was going to talk about a hammer and a nail, and you can probably guess what else. I had the hammer, but every nail was so tiny, so thin, so unimpressive, so wimpy. I needed a nail. I needed a big nail. But I was having no luck. My brother Danny was visiting. We went out to the Stonington Agricultural Fair. I love fairs. I am sucker for corn dogs, funnel cakes, cotton candy, popcorn, and deep friend snickers. I walked into that fair and followed my nose. Thankfully my brother Danny was with me. I had told Danny I needed a big nail. We entered the fair, I caught the scent of a corn dog and I was off and running. I ran right past this little booth. Thankfully, my brother Danny was with me. Danny stopped at the booth. At the booth was a blacksmith. He was displaying some of his work. Danny grabbed my shirt and pulled me back from my fried food frenzy, and said, "Look here."

Grudgingly, I came over to the blacksmith. Eventually, I told him I was looking for a nail, for a really big nail. He listened to me patiently. When he finally understood what I was seeking, he said, "What about this?" He pulled out this nail...this spike. There was a knowing look in his eyes. I told the blacksmith, "I'm preaching a sermon about the cross. I am going to use a hammer and a nail." He said, "I thought that might be the case." He said, "Look closely at this nail." The nail has this engraving. "Luke 23:34." I know my bible pretty well, but I didn't know Luke 23:34. I asked the blacksmith for help. Do you know what Luke 23:34 says? "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus said those words from the cross. How was Jesus secured to that cross? They nailed him to the tree.

Maybe I don't need to nail all these things to the door. Maybe the nail itself tells the story. I like that, but even that doesn't get to the heart of the matter. The nail is only important in relation to the cross. Without the cross, and without the one who suffered and died on that cross, the nail doesn't really mean that much. Many churches have come to the

same conclusion. Let's just put a cross up. A cross says it all. A cross says God loves this world so much he gave his one and only Son.

I was on a pastoral retreat with the staff of the church where I served. Our senior pastor was named Henry Wells. Henry was a larger-than-life figure, a mammoth of a man. Big and strong and confident. We started sharing about how much we needed Jesus. We started to pray. Henry, this larger-than-life, stronger than an ox man, he started to sing. Henry sang through tears, tears that represented his love and gratitude to Jesus. Henry sang, from memory, "When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died. My richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride." I will always remember how special that was, to hear my pastor sing about the cross. It was such a perfect moment of worship, of reverence, of surrender. On that day, Henry nailed it. Whenever you put the cross first, you nail it. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!