

## **“Rebels and Causes”**

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister

First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

Sunday, February 12, 2017

<http://firstunitarian.org/podcasts/assembly-february-12-rebels-and-causes/>

This month our theme is origins, and we're in the middle of a yearlong exploration of our origins as a congregation. Congregational humanism started right here one hundred years ago with the arrival of John Dietrich. His revolutionary approach to religion marked a turning point, and we are grateful every day for his radical contributions.

There's another important religious anniversary going on this year, one that's being celebrated by tens of millions of people around. It's an anniversary that predates Dietrich's ministry here by exactly 401 years and one day. It's the anniversary of the radical act of one of our direct religious ancestors, a true rebel whose priorities and beliefs influence us to this day. Unitarian Universalists almost never claim him as part of our origin story, because we tend to think that the Lutherans have exclusive rights to his name. But the rebellion of Martin Luther is our rebellion, too. It set in motion centuries of change that brought us the Enlightenment and eventually the humanism that we practice today. And right now, as we find ourselves living in a new era of rising resistance, it's a good time to give Luther a look. He put the protest in Protestant. And he became one of history's most successful rebels.

As I've mentioned before, when I was growing up Catholic, I didn't really know a thing about Lutheranism, except the shocking fact that their clergy could get married. Eventually I moved to Minnesota, where it seemed like everybody but me was Lutheran, and they all knew all about it. Or did they? Just recently I had lunch with an old friend who's now a staunch atheist, after hating every moment of his Lutheran upbringing. I mentioned a few of Martin Luther's accomplishments, and it turned out that my friend didn't have any idea about them. I don't at all blame this friend for covering his ears during Sunday school – the messages he was taught about sin and depravity were so damaging that tuning out religion entirely was the only way for him to survive. But we can miss out when we don't hear the whole story of how we got to where we are today. And in this era of building alliances, it's good to have a bit more understanding of our neighbors, especially neighbors who vastly outnumber us – there are more Lutherans in the Twin Cities than there are Unitarian Universalists in the United States.

So there's a reason to celebrate the big Luther anniversary this year, and a reason that the Minneapolis Institute of Art just had an enormous exhibit about Luther's life. It's because 500 years ago, Martin Luther took on the entire Catholic Church in a most radical and direct way. Five hundred years ago, the Catholic Church was synonymous with Christianity across Western Europe, and at that time the church was very busy covering itself in gold leaf. It was funneling money from the poorest to the richest. Church leaders at the very top of the hierarchy were brazenly buying their way into office. Popes – popes! – were having [multiple affairs and multiple children](#), and nepotism was rampant. Conflicts of interest were the order of the day, and the church's leaders issued all kinds of edicts and were embracing authoritarian methods. This is all not as hard to imagine as we wish. There are definitely some dots for us to connect.

These practices of the church were bad enough on their own, but what really put Martin Luther over the edge was the practice of indulgences. An indulgence was the act of giving the church money, usually a lot of money, as a good work, to balance out your sins. A sort of pay to play, if you will. Martin Luther, himself a Catholic priest, was also a scholar – he had multiple university degrees, including a doctorate. And he was very skeptical of this whole scheme. So on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, he wrote up 95 objections to what the Catholic Church was doing, and he submitted them to his bishop. (He had tried calling, but the voicemail was full.)

It's also been said that Luther nailed these 95 objections, these [95 theses](#), to the door of a church. That seems to be more legend than fact. But the theses themselves are real and well-documented, and we today might find ourselves in agreement with more than one of them. Here's gist of thesis number 86: "Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of [the richest man of ancient Rome], build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?" That's a fair question to ask a wealthy leader in any era.

A clergy colleague of mine who grew up Lutheran pointed out to me that Luther was hardly the first thinker to have these kinds of rebellious thoughts against a church gone terribly off the rails. But timing is everything: 1517, much like 2017, was a year in which the world was in the midst of a communications revolution. There was a new way to get words and thoughts out to more people more quickly than ever before: the printing press. Luther's words and thoughts took off, splitting the mighty oak of western Christianity like a bolt of lightning.

All kinds of things happened during this tumultuous period. Luther ended up being convicted of heresy, making it legal for anyone to kill him without consequence. To spare his life, a prince organized a fake abduction to spirit Luther away to safety in a

castle. While there, Luther began a translation of the Bible into German, so that far more people could read the words with their own eyes, rather than having a priest interpret the Latin for them. Direct access to knowledge and direct access to transcendent experiences are something we still strongly value today.

Around the same time that Luther was defying the pope and defying death, a small group of nuns in a nearby town had heard about the Reformation and decided that they no longer wanted to be nuns. They escaped from their convent by hiding among some fish barrels that were being taken away. Leaving the religious life behind was an incredibly risky thing for them to do. This was an era in which women did not live independently from their families or without husbands; and in fact, some of these women's families declined to take them back after their escape. Among these brave women was Katharina von Bora, whose family had left her at the convent when she was just five years old. Katharina was now an educated and skillful woman, one who was courted by a number of men, but she found them unacceptable. Nevertheless, she persisted. She persisted until she landed the husband she wanted – she married Martin Luther.

This was a very new thing in Western Europe, clergy who didn't have to live a life of celibacy, clergy who could get married. Painters and artists made all kinds of pictures of Martin and Katharina to show off this new way of doing things.

This change for clergy is just one of the ways that Luther's rebellion is still felt on Sunday mornings around the world, including right here. The importance of singing together as a congregation, in the vernacular, is also something Luther championed – he considered music second only to theology. And Luther elevated the sermon as a liturgical element – his extravagant pulpit was on display over at the art museum. Our podium here is not nearly so fancy or so high, but Sunday addresses have been central to the experience of this Society since its beginning – the power of the Word, and the power of words.

Our theology has come a long way since Luther's day, but that first splitting of the oak tree led to hundreds more divisions as religious variations branched out across Europe and beyond. A robust and coherent movement of Unitarians formed in the United States some 300 years later, and we are descended from that line.

While we owe a debt of gratitude to Martin Luther for taking a stand against authoritarianism, we must also acknowledge his deep, and deadly, flaws. He did rightly bemoan the taking of money from the poor to gild the churches of the Vatican. But when those same peasants rose up for greater rights and autonomy, Luther took the

side of the nobility, and some 100,000 peasants died. And both Martin and Katharina were horrifically anti-Semitic, calling for terrible acts to be perpetrated upon Jews. Luther's damning and discriminatory words were put to use right through the German atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are no pure heroes, and Luther's flaws are profound and devastating.

But even though we are horrified by some of Luther's actions, we can still take lessons from how he operated, how he transformed much of the world. There is much to learn from this complex rebel – things not to do, as well as behaviors to emulate. The great thing about being adults in a still-largely-free society is that we can pick and choose, separate wheat from chaff, toss the bathwater but keep the baby. We can learn from complicated ancestors and even from enemies. And so in this time of resistance and rebellion, here are some tips to take from Martin Luther.

For one thing, Luther's story illustrates the importance of having a firm sense of what you believe. It's good to be able to articulate it, to yourself at the very least, so that when a big decision comes, you'll better know what course to take, and what you are prepared to do. Luther took enormous risks and made sacrifices, and those were only possible because of his extreme clarity.

Another secret to Luther's success: He didn't go it alone. Sending his 95 theses to the bishop was a solitary act, but Luther developed a keen sense of who his allies were, which of the noblemen had his back, and which communities would stand by him. Americans tend to embrace the myth of the lone rebel, but unlike the many more solitary religious martyrs, Luther was not burned at the stake. For a person living the 16<sup>th</sup> century, he actually had a relatively long life. Luck played a considerable role in that, but so did conviction, strategy, and alliances.

And while Luther was a theological rebel, he knew the value of personal relationships, of having some kind of a home base, and of valuing humor. His marriage to Katharina was by all accounts a good one, and their home was a lively mix of children and visitors, students and travelers. Excavations at the Luther house in Wittenberg found much evidence of hearty meals, as well as lots of drinking glasses for beer. And while he was stern in his religious outlook, he had a very sharp wit. Even today, you can go online and visit the [Martin Luther insult generator](#), where you can have a sampling of hundreds of Luther zingers.

Looking back at our origins through the lens of Martin Luther and seeing what we might learn is particularly useful at this historical moment. That's because so many Americans, including many of us in this room, are asking ourselves: What should I be

doing? What makes a good rebel? And how can I keep up resistance over the long haul?

These questions are being widely asked these days, among activists, ministers, and everyday people who are realizing that something, many somethings, must be done, people who are realizing that to stay on the sidelines is to take a side. David and Kelli and I and many of you have been spending a lot of time trying to figure this out, both short-term and long-term. And I want to share with you a few pieces of advice that I've found most valuable.

These suggestions I want to tell you about are mostly from Mirah Kurzer, who is a lawyer, writer, photographer, and activist. She has a great blog post called ["How to Stay Outraged Without Losing Your Mind."](#) I want to share some of her ideas with you, mostly because I found them very helpful, but also because it feels like a bit of justice to highlight the wisdom of a prominent member of the Jewish community during a talk about Martin Luther.

The first point that Kurzer makes is this: Don't get used to this administration. Take breaks from the news and from activism, she says, just like you take breaks at your job, because it will all still be there when you get back. She points out that vacations actually increase productivity. It can be hard to think this way when there are cracks springing up all over our fragile democracy and being frantic seems like the right response.

But, Kurzer says, "if you try to maintain this fever pitch of anguish and fear and outrage, something far worse than a little down time is going to happen. Your brain, to protect you, will just turn down the volume on the outrage and *adapt*. People can get used to anything, and if you don't take steps to prevent it, you will get used to [this]." Don't do that, she says. Get away, and then come back. It's a long haul. Martin Luther took on the Church for nearly 30 years. Feminists and racial justice activists spend their whole lives doing the work. Resistance is not new to a large number of people. And nobody makes it without a break.

Another piece of advice Kurzer shares is to make activism fun. Have a contest to see how many calls or postcards you can do. After the rally, go to happy hour. Sing and laugh along the way. I personally know that this can be a challenge on the left, where simple good cheer is sometimes misinterpreted as a lack of seriousness, and where inclusive, progressive people sometimes misdirect their anger at each other in counterproductive and vicious ways. Calling people in to community is better than

calling them out for their mistakes. Love and joy need to be at the center if we are going to make it.

Kurzer says that a spirit of love and care also needs to extend to yourself. "Take care of the basics," she says. Get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, do not put off therapy or doctor appointments, have some time for your friends, and some time for yourself. "But the country is falling apart!" you might say. To which I respond, all the more reason for you not to fall apart, so you can work through these traumatic times and are healthy for the struggle. I know I've become more rigorous in my own self-care – to my swimming regimen, I've added a tiny bit of weight-lifting to channel some of the anger. And I am now playing my violin every single day, no matter what. I play that violin not for others but to keep a clear mind and to keep a tune or two in my heart. Both Kurzer and Luther would approve.

One final recommendation from Kurzer: She encourages individuals to focus their energy on one or two issues, because very few people have the time to do it all. She's clear that she does not mean that collectively we all pick only one or two issues and cast everything else aside. Rather, she writes, "the only way this works is if lots of people focus on lots of different issues, with the result that all the important stuff gets covered."

I want to close with a passage that speaks exactly to that point. These words appeared this past week on countless websites and Facebook pages. No one seems to know who first wrote them – I saw a lot of guesses but nothing definitive. Regardless of the source, they are worth sharing:

"I have been pondering a nearly forgotten lesson I learned in high school music. Sometimes in band or choir, music requires players or singers to hold a note longer than they actually can hold a note. In those cases, we were taught to mindfully stagger when we took a breath so the sound appeared uninterrupted. Everyone got to breathe, and the music stayed strong and vibrant. I read an article that suggested the administration's litany of bad executive orders is a way of giving us 'protest fatigue' – we will literally lose our will to continue the fight in the face of the onslaught of negative action. Let's remember music. Take a breath. The rest of the chorus will sing. The rest of the band will play. Rejoin so others can breathe. Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song for a very, very long time. You don't have to do it all, but you must add your voice to the song."

May it be so.