

AIM FOR THE GLORY TO GOD

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Nov. 12, 2017
Based on I Chronicles 29:10-18; Philippians 2:3-9; I Corinthians 10:31***

The sermon this morning is the conclusion of a sermon series entitled, *Here We Stand—Sure Faith in Uncertain Times*,” which has been in celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. That we are in uncertain times was grimly demonstrated this past week, when an atrocity unfolded in the most unlikely of places—a tiny Baptist church in a sleepy Texas town. It has become painfully clear in recent weeks that no place is safe from evil—whether you are at an outdoor country concert in Las Vegas, or a Walmart in Colorado, or a bike path in New York City, or a Sunday church service in Sutherland Springs, Texas. Of course, the situation of evil being everywhere is not a new circumstance in the human story. When Martin Luther wrote his classic hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” he described the world as “with devils filled.” (*though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us . . .*). But Luther and other Reformers found the answer in the Scriptures, which we will lift up this morning. Let us be in a moment of prayer . . .

We have noted during this sermon series that the Reformation was very much a response to teachings and practices in the medieval Catholic church which had departed from Biblical Christianity. It is important to keep in mind that the medieval Catholic church does not by any means represent all of Catholic history, nor it is to be equated with the Catholic church of today, which in significant ways is quite different from the church of the Middle Ages. You could hardly find a greater contrast than the contrast between Pope Leo X, the pope of Luther’s early days, who was all about amassing wealth and living in pomp, and our current Pope Francis, who eschews luxury and is devoted to the poor and lowly. If Pope Francis had been Luther’s pope, we never would have had the Reformation as it occurred, because Pope Francis in many ways represents what Luther thought the church should be—a community of Jesus’ disciples who are sincerely devoted to God and to service for others.

But consider Pope Leo X. Before becoming pope, his name was Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici—the Medici family ruled the powerful Florentine Republic. He came out of pomp and wealth; and when he got himself elected as pope, he is reported to have said, “Since God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it.” He spent lots of church money collecting fine art. He spent a lot more financing wars in Italy designed to expand Medici territory. He also wanted to build a grand new St Peter’s basilica in Rome, and, as we heard earlier in this series, sold indulgences to raise the money, which were essentially free passes out of purgatory. Luther called him the Antichrist.

When Leo X died not long after excommunicating Luther, the next major pope, after a brief two-year stint by Adrian VI, was Pope Clement VII. His name before

becoming pope was Giulio di Giuliano de' Medici. Same family—he was the cousin of Leo X. He devoted a lot more church money toward Medici family interests. You get the picture; and unfortunately what was happening with the popes was happening all across the church, as lots of bishops and cardinals were focused on their own self-advancement and self-exaltation. This reflects the basic human problem, which is expressed in one of the key Latin phrases of the Reformation—that human beings are *incurvatus in se*—curved in on self. In Popes Leo and Clement, this particularly took form of *self-glorification*.

The Reformers noted that this is the opposite of what is exemplified in Jesus, who, as the letter to the Philippians puts it, “did not grasp after equality with God but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” (Phil. 2:6-7) The Reformers ultimately concluded that the popes personified the human problem, rather than the answer. The answer is to be found in Jesus, and the Reformers finally summarized the answer that is given to us in Jesus in five short Latin phrases, which are called the five solas. We have considered four of these in depth previously, and we will conclude with the fifth this morning.

The first sola concerns where we look for the answer—it is *sola scriptura*, meaning the Scripture alone—we look to God’s Word to get a clear picture of how God is at work, and how God supremely works in Jesus. The second sola concerns what sort of answer we need—it is *sola gratia*: we can be saved by grace alone. This principle affirms that we cannot save ourselves, which is quite evident from human history. We need a higher power to act on our behalf, and we need God to act to save us even though we do not deserve it. But this is what grace is—the unmerited love of God, by which God saves the unworthy. The third sola concerns how we can receive such saving grace—it is *sola fide*: we are saved by faith alone. Faith is the opening of the heart in trust toward God; and thus this principle affirms that the fundamental change required within human beings is a change in the heart. The fourth principle concerns where this all comes together—it is *solus Christus*: we are saved by Christ alone. It is through Christ that God acts for our salvation. It is Christ who brings us God’s grace, whose Spirit can move us to faith, and who finally can bring us out of sin into fellowship with God, setting our lives aright.

The fifth sola is a picture of how human life will then be oriented when we receive God’s saving grace. It is *solis deo gloria*, which means, “to God alone be the glory.” This principle—or the denial of it—is at the heart of the Biblical story. In the beginning chapters of the Bible, which describe our basic human problem, human beings in the Garden of Eden are presented with the temptation that if they disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit, they will be “like God” [*The serpent said . . . “You will be like God” Genesis 3:4*]. A few chapters later, human beings build the Tower of Babel “with its top in the heavens” (Genesis 11:4)—a picture of how human beings continually try to put themselves on a level with God. It is not that people want to join God; they want to be God.

This drive for self-glorification appears in many ways throughout human behavior. We saw an extreme and horrible example of it last weekend in Sutherland Springs, or a

few weeks before in New York and in Las Vegas. When people commit mass murder, it is typically an act of asserting the self—responding to one’s own inner rage by claiming power over others and exalting the self above all. The mass murderer seeks glory through an act of spectacular violence.

Of course, the drive for self-exaltation is ordinarily much less brutally expressed. We commonly see people seeking glory in the quest after wealth and status, or in the desire for power and authority, or in the yearning for recognition and fame. This however does not mean that the quest for glory is entirely benign. When popes Leo and Clement sought after glory—by abusing church resources, fomenting wars, and exploiting the faithful—they brought a lot of hardship and pain on a great many people.

At the same time, the desire for self-exaltation is not necessarily sinister. We all enjoy anything that lifts us up and lets us bask in the light.

A pastor was once approached by a parishioner who said, “Pastor, after listening to your sermons week after week, I have concluded that you are smarter than Einstein.” Well, the pastor was pretty pumped up by that. Smarter than Einstein! But then he began to wonder what the man really meant by that. So the next time he saw him, the pastor said, “Hey, what exactly did you mean when you said I was smarter than Einstein?” “Well, Pastor,” the man said, “when Einstein spoke, only a few people really understood him. When you speak, no one has any idea what you are talking about.”

Whenever we try to pump ourselves up, we only get so far. Here is the first problem with self-glorification—it is foolishness. The reality is that we are small, mortal creatures; we are only kidding ourselves when we try to make ourselves great. A second, more serious problem is one we have considered already—in the process of trying to make themselves great, human beings routinely ignore others and trample on others. The human quest after self-glorification brings a lot of misery to the world. The final and ultimate problem with self-glorification is that when human beings try to make themselves God, they alienate themselves from God. We can never find wholeness in life as long as we are trying to put ourselves at the top.

The Biblical message calls us into an entirely different direction, and in the Old Testament we can see this especially exemplified in the passage we heard from I Chronicles. This was a prayer offered by King David near the end of his life, as his son, Solomon, was preparing to build a temple to God in Jerusalem. In David and Solomon we have the two most powerful and wealthy and triumphant and glorious kings in the history of Israel. Their kingdom was at its zenith. But as preparations began for the temple, David offered a prayer in which he said, “Blessed are You, O Lord! Yours is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and on earth is Yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all. Now we thank You, O God, and praise Your glorious name” (I Chronicles 29:10-13)

David was clear about where the glory lies. He knew that everything that he had obtained on this earth was only on loan from God, that all that he had gained or achieved was only by God's empowerment—that glory belongs to God alone. So he went on to say, "Who am I, and who are we, that we should be able [to make offerings in a temple]? For all things come from You, and we give You only Your own. For we are strangers and sojourners here; all our days on this earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding. But we know, O God, that You have pleasure in uprightness of heart, and so we freely and joyously make offerings to You. O Lord our God, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of Your people, and direct their hearts toward You." (I Chronicles 29:14-18)

David had achieved much in his life, and at the same time he had stumbled badly. What he finally experienced—and what he knew was the one thing that lasts—was God's grace. He was clear then how life should be directed—that we need to aim above all for the glory of God. When people aim for their own glory, they are caught up in vanity, and nothing good truly comes of it. But when we aim for the glory of God, we are lifted up in God's Spirit, we are enabled to share in God's purposes, and so we become a part of something truly great—God's eternal Kingdom.

This is precisely what is exemplified in Jesus, who gives glory to his heavenly Father, who lives as a servant, and who then is exalted in God's power and grace. So Jesus leads us in that ultimate Reformation principle—*soli deo gloria*, to God alone be the glory. And it is this direction in life that finally brings meaning and hope in a world full of evils. When we aim for our own glory, we only add to the problem; but when we direct our heart towards God, we can be a part of how God is at work for good, and we can know that God's truth and grace will ultimately triumph. So we can follow in life the admonition of the apostle Paul, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (I Cor. 10:31)