

From the Pastor: **MARTIN LUTHER HAD HEART TROUBLE**

Sounds like something out of one of those tabloid magazines; it certainly catches one's attention as we look toward our Reformation celebration. Faye Neff explains that this was not the kind of trouble a cardiologist could have detected. Luther's heart trouble was theological. You remember Luther's story, don't you? Try as he might, Luther could not seem to experience God's love; he did try with all his might. After a rash promise during a terrifying thunderstorm, Luther gave up his career plans as a lawyer and entered the monastery.

Luther was an exemplary monk. He sometimes fasted for three days at a stretch, permanently damaging his stomach so that he suffered from digestive problems for the rest of his life. At night he cast off the blankets that were allotted to him and nearly froze in his unheated cell.

Luther's trips to the confessional were notorious. He obsessively confessed every sin he could possibly call to mind, sometimes berating himself for hours at a stretch. Even after such marathon confession sessions, Luther walked away deeply troubled. What if he had forgotten some particular sin and left it unconfessed? Worse yet, what if he had committed some sins without even realizing it?

In every way, Luther excelled as a monk and outdid his colleagues. If ever a monk were to reach heaven through his "monkery," Luther would be the one. Yet, he never attained peace of mind, carrying a constant sense of personal guilt. Before presiding at his first priestly celebration of the mass, Luther agonized over his unworthiness, reminding himself that he was nothing more than dust, ashes, and sin in God's eyes.

On a trip to Rome, Luther crawled up the 28 Lateran steps repeating a prayer at each one. This procedure was guaranteed to garner divine merits and blessings for the worshiper. Yet on the top step, a thought intruded upon Luther's mind, "What if this isn't true?"

Luther wanted to love God, but the harder he struggled to perfect his own righteousness, the more guilty he became. Far from loving God, Luther later confessed that he secretly hated God who was so hard to please. Recognizing the hatred in his heart, Luther convinced himself that he had now added blasphemy to his other sins, and he sank deeper into despair.

In our own day, Luther might have ended up in psychotherapy. Instead, the earnest monk carried his inward struggles to the Bible. He resonated with Psalm 22, calling to mind the godforsaken Christ on the cross. He thrilled to Romans 1:1, Paul's assurance that righteousness derives not from works but from faith in God. Somehow in the meeting of Luther's guilt and God's grace, the monk discovered a new covenant. Or more accurately, Luther rediscovered a truth of which the church had lost sight: God loves us and sent Jesus Christ to be the proof of that love.

This amazing love revealed in Jesus is the new covenant that Jeremiah wrote about nearly two thousand years before Martin Luther. Jeremiah's people also had heart trouble. Even when they did the right things, their hearts were in the wrong place. They had an outward religion that never reached them on the inside where it really mattered. So God spoke through the prophet and promised the people a change of heart. No longer would they have just a religion of laws written on stone tablets, but now God's purposes would be written on their very hearts. The vile graffiti of sin, fear, and guilt will be erased, and in its place the will of God would be inscribed.

This is what Luther found in the Bible and brought to the church—a new covenant of love to replace the old covenant of rule keeping, a new covenant of grace to erase the old covenant of guilt and despair. Luther shook the church of his day with his battle cry, "We are saved by grace alone—through faith alone—in Christ alone."

Do you have heart trouble? The only heart that is at peace with God is the heart inscribed by God's own hand. Only the heart graced by God's new covenant knows that our sins are forgiven. That new covenant changed Luther's life.

May it continue to change yours. . *Pastor Karen*

