



# A Reformation Day Sermon: Matthew 20:1–16<sup>1</sup>

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So . . . here we are. Five hundred five years have passed since an Augustinian friar named Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses for debate on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

The sound of that hammer reverberated throughout Europe.

In a mere thirty-three years—from 1517 to 1550—in a world lit only by fire and one that communicated only by letter, the religious allegiance of half of the population will shift from Roman Catholic to some variety of Protestant.

So . . . 505 years have passed . . . but the arguments continue about Martin Luther.

In the judgment of some, mainly those allied with the Roman Catholic point of view, Luther went too far. The complaints about indulgences and other forms of church corruption were on the mark and needed to be called out.

But to challenge the very structure and authority of the church—to say that the church was a *human* and not a divine institution—well, that was plainly going too far.

*The patient is indeed ill but the cure proposed is worse than the disease.*

As his spiritual advisor in the monastery said to him, “You are creating orphans, separating the child from its parents.”

And then others judged that Luther didn’t go far enough.

In this view the pope was leading the dark forces, undermining true Christianity. The entire structure needed to be pulled down. These folks said we can Make Christianity Great Again by going back—back to the days of the apostles.

<sup>1</sup> A sermon preached on October 26, 2022, in the Chapel of the Incarnation, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Abolish all hierarchy. Live simply. Redistribute the wealth.

In this view, Luther stopped short.

But, said these folks, we need more than reform. We need a full-scale restoration of first-century Christianity.

So Luther, in the words of his former student turned radical, Thomas Müntzer, can be *lampooned* as Doctor Easychair, Doctor Pussyfoot.

Too far . . . not far enough . . . which is it??

And Lutherans—they often end up in the mushy middle. We are not Roman Catholic nor are we extreme Protestants. Closer to the Catholics on the sacraments, closer to the Protestants on suspicions about hierarchy.

A little of this, a little of that.

Just muddle through. Kind of boring, actually.

Kind of odd, too, for folk who claim as a hero a renegade monk who came within a hair's breadth of burning at a stake.

Say what you want about Luther, but he wasn't a boring, *middle of the road* type.

We will get back to Luther in a moment, but I want to point out someone else who wasn't boring.

That is the guy who owned the vineyard in the text for today. In fact, I think he was downright *crazy*. First of all, he seems to have no idea about the size of his field or the potential yield of the harvest. He makes *five* separate hires on the same day. Makes *five* trips into town! Early. 9:00 a.m. Noon. 3:00. 5:00.

Folks, this is terrible time management.

And then he doesn't seem to care about employee morale. At the end of the work day he gathers all his workers together and publicly announces that he is paying the last hires first—and all get the same wage. Predictably, he gets grumbling, backbiting, and jealousy.

And finally, there is the math involved. They all get the same! What does the profit and loss sheet look like for this guy? How does this fit into the strategic plan?

And Jesus . . . well, Jesus tells us that this all has something to do with the way heaven works.

What is Jesus up to here with this disturbing and disruptive story? I think he knows us rather well. He knows how we long for comfort and continuity and consistency and stability and recognition. Look at how respectable we are.

With our carefully harvested bushels of degrees and titles—you don't get those unless you answered that early-morning call to be out in the field. But that also means we expected to be first in the pay line, while the slackers cower in the rear, waiting for their crumbs.

But then there is crazy Jesus, announcing the *great reversal*. He disrupts our dreams and visions and plans. He makes clear that his path is anything but smooth and linear.

And now let's circle back to Martin Luther.

You see, I don't think Luther had any interest in the mushy middle. The arguments about whether he went too far or not far enough would have made him *laugh* because something else had caught his eye.

I think he caught a glimpse of this Jesus, who goes off the grid.

He knew it wasn't about measuring and weighing and calculating. Boring. Suffocating. All devices we use to stay in control.

Rather, it was about a jagged break, an enormous rupture. Think earthquake, hurricane, fire.

It was about a cross and an empty tomb.

He saw that cross as his death. He saw that empty tomb as his life.

And when life becomes a movement, not from life to death but from death to life, well, that can make you not boring . . . but bold.

You just might end up defying emperors, pope, and princes. You might even marry an ex-nun and have a family of your own.

So, if you want to lift up Martin Luther today, look where he looked—at a crucified and risen Jew. And behind it all is a crazy and foolish God, who puts fat envelopes of cash into the hands of workers who had been in the field a mere hour.

A God of reversal, who wins by losing. If that is indeed our God, then perhaps there is hope for you and me. ☩