

Last month I noted the tensions present in our principles and purposes, and even in our sources. Today I want to explore the tension between the individual and the collective.

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther posted “95 Theses” on the door of the church in Wittenberg, initiating the Protestant Reformation. At the core of Luther’s call to action against what he saw as the corruption infesting the Catholic Church were two principles: sola scriptura and sola fide.

Sola scriptura means “by scripture alone”. This theological principle asserts that scripture must govern over church traditions and over interpretations of scripture, which are themselves held to be subject to scripture. There’s a bit of circular reasoning in there. That scripture can interpret itself is meant to show the unity of Scripture as a whole.

That’s where the idea ends up, anyway. But for Martin Luther, it is a rejection of the then prevalent idea that the only way to be free of sin is to work through a priestly caste that interprets the Bible for you and tells you its “true” meaning.

Instead, Luther believed that ALL baptized Christians are a priesthood in and of themselves. That we’re ALL wise enough to see the Truth for ourselves without the intermediation of self-interested and self-aggrandizing institutions, and we’re ALL smart enough to evaluate good counsel on the merits of the person and their arguments, not their position or title or anointed status.

That was, and still is, a radical idea. The original populism, if you will, making the claim that people don’t need priests, or clerics, or ultimately kings and queens and royalty.

Sola fide means “by Faith alone”. It asserts that good works are not a means or requisite for salvation. Sola fide is the teaching that justification (“being declared just by God”) is received by faith alone, without any need for good works on the part of the individual. Good works are seen

to be evidence of saving faith, but the good works themselves do not determine salvation. Salvation, of course, grants entry of the soul into Heaven to live forever. Christian theology on all sides pretty much ends up agreeing that works are evidence of faith, and that good works are rather like Brownie points – helpful, but not necessary.

For Martin Luther, it is a rejection of the prevalent idea, then and now, that good deeds can buy you a place in heaven. As in literally buy you a place in heaven, because supporting the Church with your donation of land or gold was defined by the Church as a good deed. Instead, Luther believed that salvation is free for everyone. Rich or poor, man or woman, young or old ... just live an authentic life of Faith. That's how you get to heaven.

As Unitarian Universalists, we don't rely on scripture, and our faith is in humanity, if it is anywhere. But there is a thread that leads us back to Wittenberg.

At its core, the Protestant Reformation is about corruption and the misuse of power, a response to the lie that we cannot think for ourselves, and that our hearts are not good and faithful enough.

Everything Luther said 500 years ago rings true today, not in a religious sense but in an very secular sense. In both our political and our economic lives, we are confronted by a priestly caste of pundits and politicians and economists and academics who interpret the World for us and tell us its "true" meaning. Martin Luther would understand this dynamic perfectly.

Because we keep doing it over and over again. We keep setting up hierarchies and authorities, buying into narratives that take our power away. And we – by and large – accept this as the norm. We keep telling ourselves that it will be different this time.

I don't know if this is part of our evolutionary hard or soft wiring, or something trained into us by civilization. I suppose it doesn't really matter at this point.

And here we are again.

There are a lot of people and institutions with a vested interest in giving us the Answers. They want to “save” us, or sell us something, or provide us with a narrative that explains EVERYTHING. And if we’d only get onboard with the narrative, then salvation will be at hand. We are told it’s for our own good, or the greater good. Maybe so, but I am suspicious of narratives. A narrative, after all, is a story, and stories are not reality.

There are lot of people and institutions with a vested interest in telling us just exactly what “good deeds” need doing to be a good Democrat, or Republican, or American, or whatever.

And while they may mean well in the beginning, in the end the pattern repeats itself – these authorities end up acting in their own self-interest, in getting and keeping power by convincing us to give our power away.

Martin Luther was not the first to point this out, nor the last. I would venture to say that thousands have done so over the centuries. What Martin Luther did was to say that all that power really lay in the hearts and minds and hands of individuals. That you have it and I have it and we all have it.

This expresses itself for us in the ideas of congregational polity and Freedom of Conscience. It expresses itself in our First Principle.

That power and freedom belongs to each of us, and it is our birthright as humans. To paraphrase Immanuel Kant: *Freedom is the alone unoriginated birthright of humans, and belongs to them by force of their humanity.*

The freedom of heart and mind is not given by some deity or bestowed by a government. It is inherent in our being, no matter what our race, gender, creed, or political bent. It cannot be taken from us, but we can give it away.

The price of that freedom is that everything you do, you must do for the right reasons.

It's as simple – and as complex and difficult – as that.

What are the right reasons? You don't need me to tell you. You already know what they are, in every situation you're in. You have a moral compass.

*But let me suggest that acting for the right reasons means acting in a way that reflects who you are as a moral human being.* It means acting for your identity as a moral human being: not to gain the favor of some god or authority, not as an exchange for some greater good that we imagine will bring order and salvation to the world. And certainly not for power over others.

The core of our first principle is that we don't treat people as a means to an end. Even if we think that promotes the greater good or will bring about the most amazing Heaven on Earth. Even if we think that they are total morons who believe what we think are ridiculous things, or vote for candidates we despise, or behave in ways we don't like.

We don't treat each other as the means to some end. And we don't treat ourselves as a means to an end. No matter how noble we might think that end to be. No matter how convinced we are of the rightness of our cause or the Truth of our positions.

When we treat others as a means to an end, we start down the instrumental path ... when we start fudging and we say that this bit of speech is forbidden, or the use of reason in a particular case is oppressive, or that maybe we just ignore abuses of power in the name of a particular

outcome... and that giving up a piece of our integrity to accomplish what we calculate will be a MUCH greater good that's CLEARLY worth this small and inconsequential sacrifice of our beliefs.

Whether we're talking about a nation or a company or a family or an individual ... it always ends badly. Why? Because once you start down the instrumental path, there is no limit to the instrumental path. There is nothing that is not theoretically contingent on a greater good, including the principles and purposes we hold so dear. All the little sacrifices will end up sacrificing everything.

To promote and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person means believing that their hearts are in the right place. It means believing that they are wise enough to see the Truth for themselves, and that they are smart enough to evaluate their world and make their own decisions about what is right.

Whether they have a GED or a PhD or no schooling at all. Whether they live in shack or a mansion. Whether they travel widely, or have never gone more than a dozen miles from their place of birth. Whatever their race or nation. Whether they are socialist or capitalist or Christian or Muslim or atheist or whatever. Whether they are in your political camp or not.

When we reduce others to set of labels, we reduce them to abstractions. When we merge individuals into some abstraction, some group or collective, they lose their individuality. It is the first step in othering, in dehumanizing.

When we act instrumentally rather than from our identity as moral human beings, when we treat other human beings as a means to an end rather than as an end in themselves, we give away our birthright of freedom.

We take on a process of fooling ourselves until one day we can't even remember where our moral center lies. It's all just one big narrative that we've constructed about ourselves, which is the most powerful and the most corrupting narrative of them all.

To promote and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person means reciprocity.

I will not treat you as a means to end, if you will not treat me as a means to an end. I will recognize your worth and dignity, if you will recognize mine.

But to act from a moral center means I will not treat you as means to an end, period. No matter how you treat me.

To act from a moral center means I recognize your inherent worth and dignity, period. Whether you recognize mine or not.

True community is built on reciprocity - but it must be freely given, without condition from one moral being to another. This is how we recognize it.

Our primary identity cannot be one of skin color, or gender, or political party, or nationality, or anything other identity than that of a moral being. Why? Because inevitably, one of those will trigger instrumentality, and we are damned.

Doing the right thing means always asking why we are doing something. Is it because of some story, some narrative we've been convinced is real? Is it because of self-interest or tribal identification? Is it because some authority told us to? Is it to avoid something or simply to make ourselves feel good? Are we giving up our power or taking power? Are we buying our way into Heaven?

Or is it the right thing to do?

*Immanuel Kant also said: Do what is right, though the world should perish.*

We are called to do the right thing, to act from our identity as moral beings, no matter what.

But.. what if that means the other side wins the election, or bad laws get passed, or snakes rain down from the heavens and the sky splits open and demons roam the land?

So what if all those things happen?

If we don't do what is right, we lose. Though the world should perish, we lose.

What do we lose?

For lack of a better word, we lose our souls. Our integrity, our freedom of heart and mind, our moral center.

A terrible and tragic loss.

And that is something Martin Luther knew and warned us about, all those years ago.