

Reformation Weekend 2021: Luther's "My Lord Katie"  
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36  
Oct. 30-31, 2021  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

504 years ago, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, the Augustinian monk Martin Luther presented 95 theses, 95 points of debate, to his academic community, the University of Wittenberg. He wasn't out to make headlines, to make a name for himself, to upset the apple cart, to launch a movement that would split the Western Church and come to be known as the Reformation. Little could he have known that as the year 2,000 approached, he would be voted the most significant religious figure of the preceding thousand years.

Luther railed against the sale of indulgences, the exchange of money for the supposed forgiveness of sins and canceling of punishment in the afterlife. He criticized a papacy that perverted the Gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ by supporting such practices. He deplored corruption among clergy and abusive treatment of the laity. Not surprisingly, the institution he took to task wasn't happy about Luther's criticism. The Church of Rome took him to court, branded him a heretic, excommunicated him, made him an "outlaw." According to Rome and Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, anyone could murder Martin Luther and not suffer any consequences.

Speaking of which: Luther said his expectation that he would be killed as a heretic, one way or another, was reason enough for not taking a wife. One of the reforms he helped bring about was allowing pastors to be married. As time passed and more and more of his clergy friends and colleagues tied the knot, they urged him to do the same and practice what he preached! So he said he wouldn't want to leave his wife a widow, besides for which he was **way** too busy. One of his friends pointed out what a shambles Luther's home was in, and how he didn't care of himself very

well, concluding that Luther was way too busy **not** to have a wife. There was also the little matter that Luther's father was desperate to have grandchildren, and Luther wanted to please him. Plus he realized by staying celibate he wasn't setting a good example for others he urged to marry. There was also the little matter of an escaped nun who longed to marry and who let it slip to a friend that if Luther asked, she'd say yes.

Her name was Katherina von Bora, "Katie." Her mother had died when she was quite small. Her father remarried, and for whatever reason dropped Katie off at a Cistercian convent when she was just 9 years old. The good news is that she at least had 2 aunts living there who could look out for her, one of whom was the abbess (like head mistress). At the tender age of 16, Katie took her final vows. (Now what 16 year old is ready to commit her whole life to **anything**, no less a life behind convent walls??) By the time she was 24, Katie had heard of the teachings of Martin Luther. She was **totally** on board with the reforms he was initiating and **more** than ready to begin a new chapter of her life. Somehow she and 11 of her resourceful Cistercian sisters got word to Luther that they wanted to make a break for it. (This was dicey business, because helping nuns flee the convent was a capital crime – you could be executed for it!) Luther knew a trustworthy man named Leonard Kopp who was familiar with the convent because every once in a while he'd deliver herring there. Luther confided in Kopp and on Easter Eve, 1523, Herr Kopp made the daring rescue. Some say he put Katie and her fellow nuns **into** barrels which once held herring – or beer – and others say he bundled them **between** the barrels --or he arranged them **like** barrels in the back of his cart – regardless, the ploy worked. Three went home to their families and the rest proceeded to Wittenberg, where within a couple years all were married off -- except Katie.

Once Luther decided to take the plunge he didn't waste any time. He & Katie were engaged on one day, married the next. He was 42, she was 26. He spoke of God bringing them together but

initially didn't wax eloquent about it being a romantic match made in Heaven. He wrote, "I am not infatuated, though I cherish my wife."<sup>1</sup> Much further down the pike, reflecting on what became a solid marriage and a devoted, tender, reciprocal relationship, describing how "The greatest grace of God is when love persists in marriage," Luther wrote: "The first love is drunken. When the intoxication wears off, then comes the real marriage love."<sup>2</sup> A Luther biographer has said, "...without the person of his wife Katie, the mature Luther would be incomprehensible. There can be little doubt of Luther's genuine love and high affection for Katie."<sup>3</sup> He had numerous nicknames for her, including: "Katie, my rib"; "my lord Katie"; "Mrs. Brewmaster"; "Housewife of the Heart"; and "Madame Doctor." He would write letters to her during his frequent, sometimes lengthy absences, signing off as "your old love-bird" or "the willing servant of your Holiness."

The success of the Luthers' marriage (which was not without its frustrations) helped to normalize and set the stage for other pastors and their spouses, who were all cultivating new ground after centuries of a celibate priesthood. Let me also say Katie set a very high bar for other clergy spouses. She lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century so she wasn't playing the piano for worship or serving as Sunday School superintendent, but she was doing everything else necessary to support her husband in his endless and demanding ministry, including raising their family of 6 children, plus 4 more orphaned children from their extended family, and student boarders who sometimes brought the number in their household to 25. Then there were the continual drop-ins to feed and sometimes house as well.

Katie was the financial brains of the operation – Martin was certainly **not**. He received no money for his writings. He was keen that no one see his ministry of the Word, his service of the Gospel, as a get-rich-quick scheme, especially with his condemnation of the sale of indulgences. Luther's ministry was most certainly **not** lucrative. Katie managed the money (sometimes hiding

cash and valuables from him so he wouldn't give them away), oversaw the servants who helped maintain their huge household, took responsibility for the barnyard and its animals (doing the slaughtering herself...), tended the garden and orchard and a farm they owned in the country, made the beer, served as resident healer with her herbal remedies and poultices, and gave birth to 6 children in 8 years, two of whom did not survive childhood. When the plague ravaged Wittenberg and others fled, Katie & Martin turned their home into a hospital for the sick and dying. In support of her husband and as a radical expression of love of neighbor, Katie nursed the plague victims with as much devotion and skill as anyone.

After a more-than-full life filled with both joys and sorrows, Katie died in 1552, 6 years after her beloved husband. Her heavenly birthday, the day we remember her on the calendar, is December 20<sup>th</sup>. That's just 5 days before Christmas, so it's tough to squeeze her in with Advent IV and Christmas Eve crowding us. Reformation seems as good a time as any to celebrate a woman who so believed in justification by grace through faith that she made a daring escape from the convent, spent a lifetime serving the Lord in her holy vocation as wife and mother, and rejoiced to be Luther's helpmate for all those years.

You know some of the reforms Katie's husband Luther helped bring about: translating the Bible into German, the language folks spoke and could actually understand; translating the liturgy into the common tongue so worshipers would know what was going on; offering the Cup, the Blood of Christ, to the people in the pew; emphasizing the priesthood of **all** the faithful, naming **Baptism** and not ordination as the grounds for our dignity as baptized children of God, **Baptism** as God's anointing us to intercede for the world, shine with the light of Christ, serve as holy bridges between heaven and earth. The Reformation's most ground-breaking change of all was the fresh emphasis on GRACE: **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**: our salvation as a free and

undeserved gift of God in Jesus Christ, not a reward for performing good works. Amazingly, graciously, 450 years down the pike, the Roman Catholic Church adopted most of those reforms at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's. In 1999 Lutherans and Roman Catholics also and perhaps even **more** significantly signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, a statement that **we all agree** we are justified by grace through faith apart from the works of the law! Could Luther ever have imagined that healing in the Body of Christ??

Perhaps someday – almost certainly someday – our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ will adopt **another** reform of Luther's: allowing and even encouraging pastors to marry. In his invitation to Leonard Kopp, the delivery man who delivered Katie from the convent to Wittenberg, Martin Luther wrote: "I am going to get married. God likes to work miracles and to make a fool of the world. You must come to the wedding."<sup>4</sup> God likes to work miracles! Amen. (If you'd like to hear more about Katharina von Bora Luther, please join us for 7 a.m. Eucharist this Wednesday in-person or on Instagram.)

<sup>1</sup>Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 225.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 235.

<sup>3</sup>James L. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), p. 282.

<sup>4</sup>Bainton, op. cit., p. 226.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham