

Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation

Gedenktag des Neues Testaments deutsch

Anna Madsen

20 September 2006

Grace to you and peace from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastors of the Word know that the Word can be preached in any context, but cannot be preached in the same way in every context. This became obvious as I had the honor and privilege of presiding over the funeral of a man who was killed while riding his Harley. As I preached the Good News to this assembly of 250 gathered folk in leather, I felt as if I were at an annual Hog convention. Far be it from me to be certain that the Word was preached and heard as such, but I will tell of this short exchange following the service: A man shuffled up to me following the funeral, and said, "Pastor ma'am? Are you a biker babe under those robes of

yours?" And then he proceeded to tell me about his grandfather. "He was an ornery cuss, but this much I'll tell you: He loved the hell outta the Bible."

Today we recognize the anniversary of Martin Luther's translation of the New Testament into German, an event that occurred in 1522. This, people, is a Big Deal. Particularly for you foreign language majors, I'd like you especially to think on this: It took him only 11 weeks. The whole New Testament.

Granted, Luther didn't have much else to do at the time. He was a'hiding in a castle, because there were a few folk who wanted to kill him. They were a bit testy because of a tiny little revolution which Luther had begun, something since dubbed "The Reformation." He had been at an event, a gathering of sorts, entitled "The Diet of Worms," (I wish I were mature enough to be able to breeze by that without wanting to snort). Last anyone heard, Luther said this, after being asked if he would

rescind his writings and teachings that the Church may have gotten steered a bit off course, may have made a few errors: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God."

That pretty much did it, and though he was granted safe passage home, his pal in a high place, literally, had him spirited off to a castle, where he was kept in hiding under the name of George.

Now I've stayed in a couple of castles in my time, and they are not to be underrated. But Luther was there for a year. And after that long, the novelty of hiding in a tower wore off. He started to get itchy. Needed to do something. And it was obvious to him what needed to occur. He needed to translate the entire New Testament into German.

Despite the fact that such an endeavor might not seem to be *your* first choice while vacationing in a

castle tower, albeit reluctantly, keep in mind this: Luther was stuck like a Rapunzel in part because he wanted to wrest some of the power of the reigning church authorities and place it into the hands of the laity. How better to do this than to give them the Word of God? In their own language?

To do this, Luther took strolls about town, trying to make sure that he would translate not in ivory tower prose, so to speak, but rather in the vernacular, in the language of the street. He said, "We must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common person in the market about this. We must be guided by their tongue, the manner of their speech, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it."

And so the September Bible was published, replete with 21 woodcuts by Lukas Cranach. Despite the cost, the first 3,000 copies sold like strudel.

Already by December a revised edition was on the Bavarian Barnes and Noble shelves.

In 1530, Luther provided an introduction to his Bible. Luther was an ornery soul, and here this, ahem, gift was in full flower. Luther was ticked because some in the Church were irritated because he added a teeny tiny word to a text from Romans in his version. Allein. Alone.

In and of itself, it is an innocuous word. Unless you are spearheading a Reformation all the while basing it upon a claim that you need nothing before God, not one single work. All you need is faith. Allein. And so Luther inserted that itsybitsy word into Romans 3:28, so that the text read, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith *alone* apart from works prescribed by the law." So folk did and still do say that Luther was using this translation as an agenda to further his Reformation cause.

This accusation did not go over so hot with Luther.

Allow me:

I know very well that in Romans 3 the word *solum* is not in the Greek or Latin text – the papists did not have to teach me that. It is fact that the letters *s-o-l-a* are not there. And these blockheads stare at them like cows at a new gate, while at the same time they do not recognize that it conveys the sense of the text -- if the translation is to be clear and vigorous, it belongs there. This I can testify with good conscience: I gave my utmost effort and care and I had no ulterior motives. I have not taken or wanted even a small coin in return. Neither have I made any by it. God knows that I have not even sought honor by it, but I have done it as a service to the dear Christians and to the honor of the One who sits above, who blesses me every hour of my life.”

A service indeed. Thanks to Luther's translation, not only was “Hochdeutsch,” high German, developed

and codified, but he gave rise to similar translation attempts in other languages, not least of all in English. Like, oh, I don't know, the King James Version.

Still, two points of criticism can be raised about Luther's effort. One, it is indeed dangerous to read Scripture, let alone translate it, allein. How easy it is to make Scripture itself into a vehicle for our agenda. While Luther seems to have covered his tracks per Romans 3, it is indeed clear that there is a temptation to pay attention to certain texts but not to others, that we like to read some words this way rather than that way. Luther himself said, precisely in regards to this argument, that the book of James which contains a verse claiming quite specifically that we are *not* saved by faith alone but rather by works too, is nothing more than a book of straw.

Which brings me to the second point. As laudable as this effort was, as grateful as people of faith

can be that there is a gathered assembly of texts entitled Holy Scripture, the fact remains that most people of faith throughout the history of the Church have NOT had the Bible ever in their hands, let alone in their language. With all due respect to our beloved tune, "Jesus loves me," we do NOT believe that Jesus loves me because the Bible tells me so. We believe that Jesus loves me because we have heard the Word. The message has been spoken and heard throughout the centuries. If this is not stated clearly, then the Bible becomes an idol, the Bible becomes worshiped, rather than the One to whom it points.

That would tick Luther off.

For notice again his words. I have done it for the honor of the One who sits above. That One, of course, is the One who died and is risen...Just tell me: Is Christ's death and resurrection our work, that we do, or not? Of course it is not our work, nor is it the work of any law. Now it is Christ's

death and resurrection alone which saves and frees us from sin, as Paul writes in Romans 4: 'He died for our sins and rose for our justification.' Tell me, further: What is the work by which we take hold of Christ's death and resurrection? It cannot be any external work, but only the eternal faith that is in the heart. Faith alone, indeed all alone, without any works, takes hold of this death and resurrection when it is preached through the gospel."

"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her... A voice cries out: The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.,,And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Luther loved the hell out of the Bible. He hoped you would too. He loved the hell out of the Bible

because it testified to the Word, the Word which announces that sinners are saved, captives are freed, fear is vanquished, death is conquered. And that is news good enough to be in everyone's hands, and ears, and hearts.



