

The Looking-Glass Church

B Reformation Sunday

Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, welcome to the Reformation Story Hour. Today I have a very special story to read you, right here in this book, and it's called "The Looking-Glass Church." So here we go.

Once upon a time, oh many centuries ago and many miles from here, Dearly Beloved, there was only one big church in all the land, with one supreme bishop at its head. Now this supreme bishop at the head of the church had a dream to build a magnificent building in tribute to the glory of God. For centuries it would stand, with ornate carved doors and bronze statuary, immense columns and a vaulted dome as awesome and intricate as the heavens themselves. In order to accomplish this, the supreme bishop needed money. He needed a lot of money. What could the church sell in order to get this money? The supreme bishop had an idea: he and his priests would sell prayers. They would sell prayers that rescued the souls of dead people and delivered them into heaven. Then he could use the money to praise God with his magnificent building. The supreme bishop thought that this was a terrific plan. What a great benefit to the people, and what a great benefit to God!

Now most people in the land went along with this plan, because in truth, these kind of prayers had already been sold for a while and so this was only going to be more of the same--and anyway what they really cared about was that they could go on worshipping in church the way they always had. They liked having their church be the same from Sunday to Sunday. They liked being told exactly how much money they

needed to raise to get their relatives' souls into heaven, even if it *was* kind of a lot. They liked knowing things for sure, and having a priest or bishop who could inform them what was what and where God stood on certain matters, and they liked not having to think about it too much themselves. Life was a scary business in those days. Everything smelled and nobody knew how to read or take baths and people died at the drop of a hat--living one minute, dead the next, just like that--and you never knew when your number was coming up. So having a church that stayed the same from one Sunday to the next gave everybody a sense of comfort and reassurance to endure the plagues and crop failures and wars and famines and grinding serfdom that they faced Monday through Saturday.

Now in a country far away from where the supreme bishop who was the head of the one, big church lived, there was a little monk named Martin. And Martin liked to think his own thoughts about God. Well, this was okay with everybody as long as Martin was quiet about it and mostly took his thoughts out on himself, which he did for many years. But then one day Martin had a new thought. His thought was that no one could buy prayers that got people into heaven because heaven was a gift from God--in fact, even faith itself was a gift from God--and this gift couldn't be bought or earned. This thought was so profound and so beautiful that it almost knocked Martin right over. And when Martin recovered and looked around him at how the supreme bishop was trying to sell prayers that would deliver people into heaven in order to build his magnificent building, Martin said, "This has got to change."

Well, you would have thought the church was an anthill that Martin had just shoved a stick right into the middle of. People started rushing around and shouting at

each other and getting very hot under their clerical collars. But Martin found that once he had had his thought, he couldn't unthink it, and once he had spoken it out loud he couldn't unspeak it either, but had to keep on expressing it, and asking a lot of related questions besides, like "Why does the church have to believe thus-and-so?" or "Why don't we try to do things in such-and-such a new way?"

Now many people in the church responded to Martin's questions with a line of argument that went like this: "BECAUSE THAT'S THE WAY WE'VE ALWAYS DONE THINGS. NOW GO AWAY AND STOP BOTHERING US." They said this very loudly to try to drown out Martin's talk about change, and the supreme bishop (who *was* the one and only head of the church) also added a corollary argument he made up all by himself, which went, "BECAUSE I SAID SO," and his was the loudest voice of all because he used something called a papal bull horn to amplify his voice. So really, he and a ton of other people were very peeved and irritated at Martin because he had upset the one thing everybody thought they could count on in their lives, which was Sunday morning. (But, of course, there were also some people who agreed with Martin because that's what makes horse races.)

So both sides kept on advancing their arguments--Martin and his supporters saying, "Let's change!" and the supreme bishop and his people saying, "NO AND NOT ANOTHER WORD ABOUT IT!"--until pretty soon the supreme bishop told Martin that he didn't want him to be in his church anymore. This made Martin very sad, but what could he do? He still believed that heaven was a free gift. He couldn't alter what he believed just so he and the supreme bishop could be in the same church together. So Martin went away. He kept on worshipping God and thinking about God in the way that

made sense to him, and some other people joined him, and together, without really meaning to, they started a new church.

Now some people rejoiced that there was a new church that fit their own beliefs better than the old one. And some people were sad that the one, big church had been broken into pieces like a shattered looking glass on the ground, each piece reflecting its own bit of the vast, blue sky. And many people felt a little bit of both. But everybody, even the people who stayed in the church with the one supreme bishop at its head, had to make room for change in their churches. Change came into their Sunday mornings whether they wanted it to or not. And the brave and smart ones among them realized that the church could never be a haven from change as they had once so foolishly thought it should. The brave and smart ones, the ones who thought their own thoughts as Martin did, realized that whether the church were one whole looking glass or a thousand looking-glass pieces on the ground, all it can ever offer is a reflection of the sky--which, after all, is vast and blue and unending but also constantly shifting in its weather and its light. You can walk away from a looking glass on the ground and leave it behind, they realized, but you cannot walk away from the sky. And if encountering the sky is what you are really after, you have to turn from the looking glass yourself and look up.

The End.