

Sermon for October 25, 2020

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Today we not only celebrate our congregation's annual "Boo-liever" Sunday, we remember the Reformation. When just over 500 years ago, Martin Luther looked at the state of the church and dared to ask "What needs to be reformed?" As Lutherans today, we are to continue this practice of looking at the state of the church and the world and dare to ask, as Luther did, "What needs to be reformed?" But dare we ask?

In today's gospel story the Pharisees, having heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, bring their own questions to Jesus. Being strict followers of religious law, they ask "Which commandment of the law is the greatest?" Jewish tradition recognized 613 commandments, including the 10 commandments. These laws focused on what you should and should not do. How could Jesus answer without bringing offense and minimizing God's laws? How could one law be deemed more necessary to religious righteousness than the other 612?

Jesus responds "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And a second, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." For Jesus, everything hangs on these two commands – this is the underlying purpose of all the laws.

The Pharisees do not respond in the text and our text ends "nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions."

Dare we ask...because we might get an answer...an answer that demands change in us.

Why are the Pharisees silent after Jesus states the greatest commandment?

The Pharisees' holiness and righteousness rested in their strict obedience to the 613 laws. They spent their life studying the laws and doing their best to live it to the letter to be right with God. We find some of these laws in our first reading for today. The Lord speaks to Moses and instructs him to tell the people "You shall be holy..." and proceeds with the "you shall nots" and the "you shalls." "You shall not render an unjust judgement. You shall not go around as a slanderer. You shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor," etc., etc.

The Pharisees have heard this and other lists of rules, and in many cases have broken them into even smaller more specific rules for how they are to live to be right with God. But Jesus, in stating the greatest commandment, is suggesting that they have missed the point. They have been so obsessed with finding their righteousness through the law that they are no longer living the heart of the law, the purpose of the rules, to "Love God, Love Others."

They have missed God's most important words. "You shall be holy" why? "for I the Lord your God am holy"... "I am the Lord." We are not righteous through the law; we are righteous in the Lord alone, through God's work, through the God who loves us, freeing us to love in return. And the Lord, the Messiah, the one through whom the world is made right, stands before the Pharisees in Jesus and they do not love him or the message he carries.

And “love your neighbors as yourselves?” The Pharisees have become too lost in themselves, in their own struggle for righteousness, to remember their neighbor. Rather they declare their righteousness on their ability to follow the law over and above the other, even at cost to the other.

Jesus’ answer to their question unravels the core of their identity, the way they have found their worth, their very understanding of their relationship with God. And they are left silent... but unmoved... They dared to ask but they will not dare to live into the answer, into the love of God which stands before them in Christ and frees them to love their neighbor. Instead they stubbornly cling to their ways, to their understanding, asking no more questions and nailing the answer to the cross.

Interestingly, the question the Pharisees ask and the question we ask as present day reformers may yield the same answer. Which commandment is the greatest? What needs to be reformed in the church today? You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and you shall love your neighbors as yourself.

When Luther asked this question “What needs to be reformed?” he was always asking it for the purpose of the clarity of the gospel. What needs to be reformed for the Good News of the Gospel to be effectively clarified and lived out in the world today? Could it be that right now for the gospel to be communicated, we, the church, must remember and live into the greatest commandment: Love God, Love People?

Have we in some ways, like the Pharisees, lost the core, lost the purpose of our religion some days?

Dare we ask because we might get an answer. And would the answer silence us and leave us unmoved?

Imagine our front stained-glass windows for a moment. Jesus stands with his arms open, inviting all to “Come Unto Me.” To Jesus’ right is a stained-glass image of two tablets, the tablets holding the 10 commandments. On the first tablet are the first 3 commandments, on the second tablet the last 7. Did you know the 10 commandments are broken into two sections: the first 3 practices for “Loving God”, the last 7 practices for “Loving Others”? All the commandments hang on these “Love God, Love neighbor.”

While we can break the commandments into many small little laws, we must never fail to understand “You are holy BECAUSE I the Lord your God am holy.” “Come unto me.” The first three commandments come first, because only when we remember that our righteousness is found in God alone are we free to stop living to justify ourselves and freely live for love of neighbor.

Did you know the first words proceeding the reading of the 10 commandments are “I am the Lord your God”? In Luther’s Small Catechism, Luther begins every explanation of each commandment with the words “We are to fear and love God...”

We love neighbor because we fear and love God. We love other because “I am the Lord your God.”

Loving neighbor is not just found in the “Shall nots.” Take for example the 8th Commandment. Because you love God, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” What does this mean? Luther states “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not betray, slander or lie about our neighbor BUT defend him, speak well of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way.”

Because we love God we will not betray, slander or lie and we DO defend, speak well and explain our neighbor’s actions in the kindest way. Who is our neighbor? We must rather ask: Who is *not* our neighbor in the world God made? Because “I am the Lord your God,” because “we are to fear and love God,” we must look for ways to work to defend all, speak well of all, to explain all in the kindest way. And all must include the neighbor on the other side of our self-made divisions: other political party, other gender, other race, other age, other socioeconomic status, other ability, other orientation, other opinion.

What is the greatest commandment? What needs to be reformed? Dare we ask? For Jesus will answer “Love God, Love others” and we will be forced to decide - will we stand silent, unmoved before Jesus through whom we are made holy?

This “Boo-liever” Sunday, we confess “We believe in God.” Therefore we must ask and I believe we must be moved. Psalm 1 says happy are those who delight in the law of the Lord. 1 Thessalonians urges Christ followers to have courage in spite of opposition – reminding us that we have been entrusted with the message of the gospel.

As we remember the Reformation, let us like Luther ask “What needs to be reformed in us today for the Good News of the Gospel to be effectively clarified and lived out in the world?” Then may we move in courage because we fear and love the Lord our God and are freed and made holy through Christ to live the good news.