

21st Sunday after Pentecost- Reformation and Stewardship

Matthew 22:34-46

Mitch and Lindsey, Ashley and Ryan, as you bring Brooks and Chase to be baptized this morning this gospel text is particularly appropriate because it raises the question- what is the essence of our calling as followers of Jesus?

The answer to that is important. If you believe your calling is to dominate the world and others, you will relate to people in a particular way, with some very specific actions you take to break them down, mentally, physically, and emotionally.

If you believe your calling is to love your neighbor, you will relate to people quite differently. Again, with some specific actions, but ones designed to build them up, mentally, physically, and emotionally.

What does Jesus say about our calling- our purpose as human beings?

His first answer is one any Jew would give, it comes from the Shema- the Jewish equivalent of our Apostles' Creed, a basic statement of faith based on Deuteronomy 6:5-9. "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind." In other words, with all that you are- your whole being. Nothing is held back from loving God.

This makes sense- as our confirmands asserted rightly on Wednesday- the first commandment- I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods- is the greatest because without that, the rest don't mean much. God is that which we fear, love, and trust most.

Jesus' answer would sound right even to the Pharisees, but then Jesus continues- "there is another like it... love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two." That language is a bit obscure to us, but would easily be understood by those standing around him. The first five books of the Hebrew scriptures were called the Torah- the Law. The other main texts read and studied by the Jews were those of the Prophets. Everything in scripture- Jesus is telling them- everything authoritative to you hangs on those two callings. Love God, Love neighbor.

And it is a calling we see in God's own activity. The Ten Commandments is split the same way- three commands about our relationship with God- no other gods, make good use of God's name, rest in God regularly. Then seven commands about our relationship with people- honor your parents and those in authority, don't murder, steal, commit adultery, lie about people, don't covet those things that belong to others.

The Law demands righteousness- right relationship with God. The Prophets demand justice for people on the margins. The prophets warn Israel that their actions, neglect for the poor, widows, orphans, and aliens in their land, come from their worship of other gods.

Jesus is saying that righteousness and justice are related. Intertwined. Even as our love of God and love of neighbor is.

So, you have our marching orders Mitch, Lindsey, Ashley and Ryan- teach Brooks and Chase to love God with all that they are and to love their neighbors as themselves. But, you might rightly ask, what do those things mean? Give us some specifics.

What does it mean to love God with all that we are? There are many answers, but we give some specific ones in the rite of baptism- it means living with other faithful people. It means coming into the presence of God in worship and scripture. It means learning and practicing the art of prayer- talking with and listening to God. It means making those things a priority in our lives- before all other things (sports, work, play, our phones, the internet) because we are to love God with all that we are- to give the best and first to God. Because what we place in front of us, what we feed our children and ourselves shapes us.

Okay, there are some good specifics there. But what does it mean to love our neighbors? Well, first we have to understand that love here is not how we feel. Rather, love is how we act to them. Matthew is a gospel that says faith is lived, not spoken. It is not just lip service but lived service. That our actions speak louder than our words, in both faith to God and love of one another.

This can rub us Lutherans wrong. While we tend to focus- especially on Reformation Sunday- on the primacy of grace- that we do nothing to earn our salvation, that it is pure gift given to us- just like those \$5 four weeks ago- We often forget that when that conversation was done, Martin Luther pointed to the fact that grace has freed us not only from- sin, death, and the devil- but freed us to... to serve our neighbor. Luther is also quoted as saying that God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does. As we learned in the Gospel of Luke last year, our neighbor is the one who is in need. We are freed from trying to please God with our behavior so that we might serve our neighbor.

How do we love our neighbor in deed and truth, not just in lip service? We love our neighbor as we care for them in the ways the Gospel of Matthew will lay out

in the 25th chapter- we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless. Things we have recommitted ourselves to as a congregation for 2021.

We do this as we share of ourselves and all the abundance that we have. As we share our time and attention with our neighbor in need, as we share our resources, the abundance God has given us to steward, to manage. We do this when we recognize that the cups overflowing set before us are for sharing, as the owner of those cups has done with us.

We love our neighbor when we treat them with respect for the image of God that exists in them, regardless of how they treat us (Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing). We love our neighbor when we follow the 8th commandment against bearing false witness and instead speak well of them and look at what they do in the best possible light regardless of their actions.

Imagine what our political discourse would look like if we just did those two acts of love. It doesn't mean that all would be right in the world and all conflict or difference of opinion would cease- we are human beings after all. We are made differently- thanks be to God! But, the way in which we would disagree, in which we would work out that conflict, would be much different. Can we even use our divine imagination to get a sense of what that would look like?

In a glimpse of hope, we don't have to imagine. On Tuesday, Republican Lieutenant Governor Spencer Cox and law professor Chris Peterson, a Democrat, who are running against each other to be the next governor of Utah, appeared together in a series of ads to call for civility among voters. In the ads, they point out that we can "disagree without hating each other," that we "can debate issues without degrading each other's character." They chose to do this, they said,

because it helps American democracy, it works better in the long run, and because it is basic human decency. I would add, because God calls us, commands us to do so. I encourage you to watch the ads, it can be a beacon of hope in a world filled with hate.

The church is always being re-formed, changed, even as we are. We are always needing to re-affirm those promises made for us in baptism and the ones we made at confirmation- promises at their core that said we would spend the rest of our lives loving God with all that we are- because God is the very one who gave us life! And loving our neighbors as ourselves- because in them we meet the image of God, because we might be the means by which God provides them daily bread, because they might be the means we receive daily bread.

We need to re-affirm them because we forget. We backslide. We fall prey to the belief that we are god and that we are called to dominate other people, at least those outside our tribe. This is nothing less than idolatry. The breaking of the first commandment to have no other gods.

We wake each day and affirm our commitment to this calling to love God and love our neighbors because we experience each day the freeing power of God's grace. Especially if we train ourselves to look for it. How do we do that? Immerse ourselves in scripture. The story of our ancestors in the faith, the story of God's pursuit of God's creation, our story of who God is, how God acts in the world, and of what our purpose as human beings is. This is why both in our Sunday School and our Confirmation we are going back to those stories, because that is how we find out who we are.

On this Reformation Sunday I pray that we would re-new our commitment to that Word of God found in scripture. I pray that we would be touched again by God's grace, even as we see it poured out on Brooks and Chase today. I pray that we would re-affirm our calling to love God with all that we are and love our neighbor as ourselves- so that the hungry would be fed, the naked clothed, the homeless find shelter. So that through us the world might get a glimpse of the coming Kingdom of God.

This can sound like an impossible task. But, as Jesus has reminded us, with God...all things are possible. Are you tired? Come to the table, receive the Meal of bread and wine- Christ's body and blood that embody God's love, grace, and forgiveness. Be strengthened by it for the task ahead. Do you feel hopeless? Dip again into the waters of baptism. Feel God's grace and loving embrace cascade over you washing you clean. Making you new again. Giving us hope that change can happen. Come, one and all to these visible signs of God's love for us and for our neighbor. Receive them that we might be strengthened to love God with all our being and love our neighbors as ourselves.