

## **Reformation Sunday October 29 2023**

### **Psalm 46; Romans 3:19-28; Matthew 22:34-46**

We observe the Reformation on this Sunday before October 31, the date in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Thesis on the church door in Wittenberg Germany. The moment many point to as the start of the movement that is called the Reformation. A movement that changed world history.

We do not celebrate this day, because the reality is that movement contributed to some awful things, the Peasants Revolt, the Thirty Years War, the division of the church. We do remember it, observe it, because it also instilled in us Christians who happen to be Lutheran a number of important ideas about who God is and who we are in relationship to God and to each other.

One of those is the fact that like baptism, the re-formation of the church is not a once and done thing, but rather an ongoing activity. Not that we make change for changes sake, but that we know that the church- the assembly of believers- is constantly in conversation about what things are essential to our proclamation of the Gospel and what things aren't. That we continually check to see that we are keeping the main thing the main thing.

Something that Jesus points to in our Gospel today. This is the third question that Jesus' opponents had put before him to "trick" him. The first is the question of paying the Imperial Tax. Commentator Mark Davis believes this question asks us

to consider what is the relationship between our ultimate loyalty to God and our relative/required loyalty to our nation? Which do we love more? Our God or our country?

The next comes when Jesus tells the story of the landowner whose slaves and son are murdered by evil tenants, he asks what the landowner should do. The Pharisees and chief priests answer, “Kill the tenants!” Jesus responds that God takes what is rejected and makes it the cornerstone. Davis sees this as Jesus talking about resurrection. He writes, “Resurrection, in this sense, is the opposite of revenge. It is not just a religious doctrine of life after death; it is a political direction that is posited over and against the cycle of violence that comes from vengeance.” In other words, God does not say to kill those who are over and against us, but to resurrect them. What does this mean for our own politics today and how we view and talk about one another?

Finally, Davis says, we have our text today which posits the question- what is the essence of our calling? Who are we meant to be as humans? Jesus says it is twofold. To love God with all that we are. Not us. Not our own desires or wants. And this is intimately linked with our love of our neighbor. A love Jesus has said in the Sermon on the Mount that includes our enemies and those who persecute us. These two things, Jesus says, are essential to what it means to be fully human.

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we understand this. That’s why I hang with this crowd because our understanding of humans and God and our relationship to both matches my experience of reality. When we affirm our

baptism, as Sawyer will do today, and as we do every day that we arise and dip our fingers into the water and remind ourselves that we are a baptized child of God, loved and forgiven by God. When we affirm this baptism, we affirm that we are citizens first and foremost of the reign of God. We live by God's rules first. In relationship with God first and that relationship guides all else that we do in our lives.

And secondly, it means we are called and equipped to love and serve our neighbors as God in Jesus has loved and served us. We don't do so because it will get us into heaven or even a bigger mansion in heaven. Paul in Romans and Martin Luther throughout his writings reminds us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Me and you. The Pharisees and Sadducees. But we are put in right relationship with God by God's grace. A gift freely given to us in Jesus Christ. And having been made righteous, we live as if we are righteous. Put another way, God does not need our good deeds, but our neighbor does.

They need us to share our food so they may eat. They need us to provide shelter because they have none. They need grace because they are sinners. They need healing because they are wounded. And we can provide that because God in Jesus has fed us, sheltered us, given us grace, healed our wounds. But what does that look like?

Theologian Russell Moore writes that when talking especially to younger Christians he almost never encounters people justifying their sins or denying a need for repentance (a change of thinking and action), rather he finds those who

think they're failing and are bad Christians. When he presses them on why they think that he finds that they are usually expecting to repent of a sin one time and never grapple with it again. Moore reminds us that is not how repentance works. That if by following God we expect some kind of peace or rest from the awareness of our selves as sinners, messy, imperfect people this side of the grave or Jesus' second coming we are mistaken.

Instead, he points us back to the idea of a church always being re-formed and a people who always need those waters of baptism. He writes, "You will never get too spiritually 'successful' to move to some other way of praying. You 'win' by confessing your sins, claiming the gospel." A gospel that says there is no condemnation in Christ, that you can be made new again through God's grace and mercy made tangible in the waters of baptism, that it is not your sinfulness (again and again and again and again) but God's love that defines you.

I hang with the Christians who happen to be Lutheran because we need the Jesus we have, not the Jesus we often want or create. A number of commentators argue this is what Jesus is talking about in the latter part of our gospel. He asks, "What do you think of the Messiah?" Like the disciples, these Pharisees were expecting a great warrior who would violently throw out the Roman occupiers and claim political power. Who would put "those people" in their place. Instead, God sent Jesus. Who took upon himself the results of our desire for power, control, domination, security. Our thinking that we have the wisdom and ability to take God's role. That result was death on the cross. In that way it was us who put him there. But in dying and being raised by God, Jesus freed us from all that.

Friends in Christ, we have spent the last four months sitting at the feet of Jesus and pondering what it means to live in the reign of God. To be an outpost of that reign here on the corner of Walker and Rowley. I wonder if it just doesn't boil down to these two things. Love God above everything else with all that we are. Trust God above all else with everything that we are. Engage with everything else in this world through that lens, that they are indeed secondary things. They may be easier, feel good, get me ahead in this world- but they should always come second to God.

And.... Shaped by that love of God and being loved by God, love ourselves and other human beings in the same way God in Jesus has loved us.

Sounds easy, but as my class for the University of Dubuque discovered last Thursday night, it's not. I asked the question, What does it mean to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us when those people have just committed horribly unspeakable acts against us? How do we even discern that?

Their answer, from their study and readings in scripture. The church does that together. When he wrote the Bible in the common language of the day and talked about the priesthood of all believers, Martin Luther never intended that to become -we go off and do faith on our own. After all, he knew the fact that we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Rather, Luther's intent was for there to be more people in the Body of Christ who knew these texts intimately, who had sat at the feet of Jesus day after day and who could reflect with us on what

that might look like. That together we might come to some answer as to what it means to love in that case.

Sawyer joins that body fully today as he affirms his baptism and steps more fully into the promises his parents made at his baptism. He joins us as we continue to strive, day after day, to live among God's faithful people, hear God's word and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in word in deed, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

As we come here, week after week, to practice the art of loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbor as ourselves. To sit at the feet of Jesus and in conversation with other believers to discern what that might mean for feeding the hungry in Ely, or dealing with that over-bearing boss, or navigating those kids at school who pick on you.

To come week after week to hear the truth. You are a messy person, a sinful person, and God loves you. Loves you enough to forgive you, gift you the Holy Spirit through the waters of baptism and God's Word. To feed you with the Body and Blood of God's own Son, Jesus and with this community of fellow believers. So that you can go back out into the world and strive – again- to be what you are... a beloved child of God whose mission in life is to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbor as God in Jesus has loved you. And to me, that's pretty good news.