

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Anne H.K. Apple
Sunday, October 25, 2020

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On those two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son? No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Today is Reformation Sunday.

It is a Sunday when we nod to the power of change, not for change's sake, but for the sake of love. Specifically - God's love, in Christ Jesus, at work in the church.

When Martin Luther saw the church abuse its power, making the poor pay indulgences telling them that they might get out of purgatory and into heaven sooner, he challenged a transactional theology. It was his pastoral response. Salvation was not about what you said, or did, or how much money you paid in indulgences, salvation came from faith in Christ alone.

John Calvin followed Luther, continuing to push for reforms. He wrote his magnum opus, The Institutes of Christian Religion, when he was 27. His institutes everything you needed to know about the whole sum of godliness and whatever is necessary to know about God's saving doctrine. Calvin intended to be an academician, but felt God's call in a way that he ended up a pastor in Geneva where he reportedly preached hour-long sermons every day of the week. He built an educational system that would change the world. Again, not for change's sake, but for the church, and her people to be ordered rightly in the Word. "The church reformed, always reforming by the Word of God."

God is constantly at work in and through us, in Christ Jesus, whose love leads the way. And - reformation whether in the church or the constitution, isn't always easy.

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Bryn Greenwood, the author of *All the Ugly and Wonderful Things*, tweeted, “If you only read books that make you feel safe and comfortable, what’s the point in reading?” She wasn’t speaking about reading the Bible, but certainly, she could have been. To be reformed by the Word of God, we have to be reading it - and it’s not always a feel-good read. An honest view and examination of our roles in the parables can bring discomfort.

Bryn tells of a writing class exercise at Kansas State and a particular methodology for writing. For homework, students are invited to write a story about an encounter with someone who radically altered their view of the world. In class, they read these stories aloud. Then, in class, they must write the same story from the perspective of the other person.

When we come to this text in Matthew - about the greatest commandment and the one that is like it - Jesus has been flexing the muscles of disagreement on behalf of those who had been marginalized. Jesus has been doing the work of God’s love - living in loving kindness and active mercy for justice. In doing so, he reveals the power of God’s love at work in Him. Jesus, the Messiah, is the Lord’s, the Son of God. He responds to God’s love with the whole of who he is.

The religious leaders, and in this case, a lawyer, seek to demonstrate a “win” or a “gotcha” to entrap Jesus. The lawyer was confident he was right. The trap is set for a black and white, right and wrong answer.

With Jesus, and in life, nothing is that simple. When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment - he sets the first commandment into a greater perspective for the lawyer.

Jesus says, the first, “Love God” which is drawn from Deuteronomy and the Shema. And then he quickly says, “And love your neighbor, like yourself.” This second, drawn from Leviticus, adds the depth of perspective. Jesus says - everything - judgment and salvation - everything, the whole of life hangs on these two because, God’s love is an action.

In his Institutes, John Calvin said of such love, “Love is the first and great thing that God demands from us, and therefore the first and great thing that we should devote to Him. We learn from this that God does not rest satisfied with the outward appearance of works, but chiefly demands the inward feelings, that from a good root, fruits may grow.”

When we trust in God’s care and provision, we grow in love and faithfulness. We look to the neighbor first - and do not judge, but serve in love, no matter the obstacle. As Paul says in Romans, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is a fulfilling of the law.” Paul Tillich says, “In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen. ... the first duty of love is to listen.”

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An interesting perspective, or question for us to examine. How do we from that Good Root of God's good love listen as disciples of Christ? From our neighbor's perspective, is he - or is she - truly experiencing God's love from us?

When we love our neighbors like ourselves, God's love is not a love that leads down a path of least resistance, but some days it feels more like an obstacle course.

When we love our neighbors like ourselves, God's love ensures justice for our neighbors, not indifference or hostility.

When we love our neighbors like ourselves, God's love is not earned by good Christian behavior that avoids biblical imperatives for justice.

Embodying God's love in Christ Jesus is hard work. Thomas Merton said, "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy."

To the test, and confrontations, Jesus revealed great forbearance. God's active love held on to him in that place of discomfort as he asked the hard question, "What do you think of the Messiah?"

Dolly Parton was a virtual guest on the Stephen Colbert show earlier this week. He cried as he listened to Dolly describe the way her mother wove stories into songs. Wiping tears away, he asked, "What are you writing these days?"

Dolly responded, "I don't know if I'm writing it to the world, or to a person, but it goes something like this."

I love you.
Whether you like it or not.
You can't tell me what to do.
You can't make me not love you.
Cause I love you.
You can't stop me.

Dolly's song sounds like lyrics working for reform in a polarized world.