

Reformation: Reflections on Matthew 22:34-46
Reformation Sunday October 29, 2017 Michael Barrett

Today as we remember the reformation that was 500 years ago, let us also acknowledge the reformation that is present now and celebrate the reformation that will forever be.

The meaning of reform: to improve by a change in form; to introduce a better method or course of action; to amend what is defective; and to rectify by removal of faults, corruption, or abuse by amendment.

In a world replete with so many distractions – political systems that are broken, peace seemingly ever out of reach, economic forces beyond control, social problems without consensual solution, and a world that demands faith, hope, and charity be replaced with an ever more expensive canon of consumerism; it is no wonder how easy it is for any of us to lose sight of what God has called us to do.

God has breathed life into us for a reason.
God has bestowed the lives given us with a mission.
God has always sought to reshape us and reform us for the better.

When we – as society or as a church or as a person become so beguiled, befuddled, or bewildered, that we disremember God's purpose in our lives; then we can expect God to take action by inviting us to reform. God cherishes us that much. God is that passionate about us. God desires us that much. God loves us that much. God never gives up on us. Never. God does this through the prophets – old and new, through His Word, through reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldrych Zwingli; through the reforming people, creatures, and creation that we experience; and especially through the greatest reformer ever -- presence of Jesus in our lives.

Nowhere is God's determination to reform us made clearer than in today's reading from Matthew. Jesus offers God's opportunity to reform ourselves by remembering why we are here, what we are to do, how we are to do it, and who we can rely on in accomplishing it.

It begins with today's incredible debate with the Pharisees. Jesus responds to them with an answer the Pharisees cannot question, followed by asking them a question that the Pharisees cannot answer. Is Jesus really answering and asking us the same?

All of this occurs on passion Monday. Jesus has entered into the Temple. He has expelled the moneychangers. Jesus now tries to teach us. But the assault by His enemies continues.

Under attack by the Sadducees, Herodians, and now the Pharisees, we have seen Jesus' authority questioned, he's been tested about the nature of resurrection and paying Roman taxes; and today the prepared trap deals with Jesus' interpretation of the Law. His enemies hope that Jesus will say something of such radical dissent that heresy or blasphemy charges can be leveled against Him or hope that He will proclaim something that will greatly divide and weaken His followers.

So they ask, *Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*

This very question sounds as if it might have been discussed a countless number of times by rabbinic scholars. Note we are not talking about just the TEN COMMANDMENTS – no, no – the Hebrew Scriptures list 613 commandments – 248 are things to do, while 365 are prohibitions (248 = number of human body parts; 365 = one for each day of the year). The Pharisees placed emphasis on memorizing, reciting, and obeying each and all of the 613.

And Jesus answers, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.* Deut 6:5 – quoting the prayer most devout Jews say twice each and every day.

Love God with ALL your thoughts, words, and deeds – that is your heart.

Love God with ALL your emotions, desires, and affections – that is your soul.

Love God with ALL your intellect, dispositions, and attitudes – that is your mind.

Strive to love God as God loves you – with a love that is unmotivated, unmanipulated, unconditional, and unlimited.

For God loves us as we are, yet God loves us too deeply to leave us the way we are. The invitation to reform is always there. It is never too late.

But it is a love that demands not only commitment but also action.

And . . . love your neighbor as yourself. Lev 19:18 *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*

Dear Worship Team – thank you for putting up this door! This door is an exact image of what Jesus is saying. See all these wood strips (?) imagine naming each one of them – here's Genesis, over here is Samuel, see Deuteronomy, down here is Isaiah right next to Jeremiah; Micah and Malachi are hanging out over here, in this corner we Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and look 21 slats all labeled epistles. This DOOR is the Law and the Prophets, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Testament.

The two hinges are the commandments Jesus just spoke of. Without these hinges the door will not work. Without the door, the hinges are useless. Both hinges are needed. They are distinct, but cannot be divided. There is only one great commandment. Jesus tells us that the first part, loving God, cannot be met unless the second part, loving ones neighbor, is accomplished and that the second cannot be accomplished if the first is not met. Both Deut and Lev were well known, but no one before Jesus has brought these two hinges together. It's revolutionary – Jesus has made love the center, the sustainer, and the seat of the Law. Love makes God's Word work. Jesus has turned the tables – Jesus makes love the test of one's true understanding of the Law.

Jesus doesn't say: "memorize this commandment"; Jesus doesn't say "recite this commandment," Jesus doesn't say "think about this commandment" – Jesus says DO this commandment! He uses the imperative! That is where real re-form-ation begins.

If we want to reform our lives in a way that will make a real difference, then:
We will love God and love what God loves;
We will keep becoming the kind of person who loves God and love what God loves, ever better and better, and
We will do this in a commanded community of neighbors that socializes, transforms, and enables us, one and all, to obey this one greatest commandment.

Meaningful reformation is no easy task – it is laborious in its effort, limited in its observable effect, and life-long in its endurance.

What does this re-formed love require of us? What does it mean to love with a better course or better method? What does it mean to love in striving to amend what is defective? What does it mean to love in seeking to remove faults, corruption, or abuse?

This re-form love requires the investment of direct, 'quality' time. Reserving time to spend with God. Time is prayer, service, observation fellowship, and study. Reserving time to spend with the neighbor. Time also spent in prayer, service, observation, fellowship, and study. Time is the greatest unheralded gift. We need to spend that powerful resource with those we profess to love.

This re-form love requires communication of us both in terms of active listening and thoughtful expression, directly with both God and neighbor. In the reformed tradition, the emphasis is on that directness – not through a mediator or a hierarchy. That's why we don't have separate orders of clergy who are assigned to do all the spiritual works and laity that follow doing only secular pursuits. All of God's children have political,

economic, social, ecological, and spiritual missions. We need to consider how we bring this great commandment into all the spheres of our lives.

God is not off beyond the farthest galaxy. God does not require some holy Internet spiritual provider to access. Each of us has a dedicated line. God is as close as the air we breathe. God will instruct our mission.

This should be evident because God in the form of Jesus came looking for us, to be with us in direct relationship, to reform and save us. God has always made the first move to dwell within our hearts and to be with us. So much so that by His life, mission, sacrifice, and resurrection Jesus accomplished our forgiveness and salvation. It is through faithfully honoring Jesus, growing in Jesus, and serving Jesus that we are now made right. We can stop trying to trust in our own efforts make things right with God. Jesus has already done it. God will direct our mission.

This re-form kind of love requires gaining knowledge and understanding of the beloved. . Do you remember how many times Jesus quotes Scripture this morning – three. How do we know and understand God better? In the Bible God reveals himself to us in covenants, through prophets and teachers, through faith stories, through conflict and commandment, through song and vision, and most profoundly through the life and ministry of Jesus. Wonderfully, God’s Word is not frozen in time – at all times the Word is alive and active as Paul says in Hebrews 4:12. God is still speaking and one of those means is through Scripture. God uses Scripture to handle us. We strive to align our practices and beliefs within God’s Word. Yes, truth may be expressed in non-biblical forms or words, but what is expressed in a reformed tradition must be Biblical truth. *Sola Scriptura*. And the church is not to come between the believer and his Bible. Imagine if roger this morning had said to you:

Ait illi Iesus: diliges Dominum Deum tuum ex toto corde tuo, et in tota animal tua, et in tota mente tua. Hoc est maximum, et primum mandatum. Secundum autem simile est huic: diliges proximum tuum sicut teipsum. In his duobis mandatis unversa les pendet et prophetae. Or Jesus replied Love the Lord your God . . .

This re-form kind of love requires us to gain knowledge of our neighbor. But we need to ask, who is my neighbor? Is it family? Is it friends from church or school or work? Is it people who think, dress, act, and vote like me? Is it a stranger? Neighbor is an old English term – neah (near) and gebur (dweller). Who dwells near us?

Jesus defines ‘neighbor’ in Luke 10:25-3. He doesn’t say a word about family, friends, or even strangers. He talks about a man walking down the road to Jericho. The man is

beaten up and left to die. A man broken up and beaten down by life. A man dying. Who are the people we know who are beaten up and broken down by life. Who do we know who is dying? In Luke's time those neighbors were likely poor, maimed, blind, lepers, or lame. In our times those neighbors could be the homeless, drug dependents, oppressed, the mentally destitute, or the aged. Who is beaten up and broken down in your life? Who is dying? Behold they may be a family member or a friend or a stranger. Look. Listen, and Love. Far and near. Your neighbor may be much closer than living next door.

This re-form kind of love requires us all to be ministers. Martin Luther calls forth a priesthood of all believers. A reformed love means we all use all of our gifts in any ministry in carrying forth God's mission. There is one gospel, one savior, and one people before God. Yes, God calls us and gifts us each differently – doctors and dentists, farmers and pharmacists, pastors and professors, realtors and ranchers, attorneys and artists, and princes and paupers. But we each have spiritual duties. Whatever we are doing in life as individuals and as communities we need to seek therein to do deeds that show love for God and that show love for neighbor. Deeds done in an attempt to earn merit with God are wasted, but deeds done in appreciation of God's love matter. Good deeds do not need an excuse.

And finally this re-form kind of love requires us to trust in Jesus. *What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?* Is the Messiah David's son or David's master? The poor Pharisees had never been asked that question before and they didn't know the answer, even though it was standing right in front of them.

We trust that Jesus is both. Jesus is divine and Jesus is human. But unlike a David-like warrior messiah who would vanquish tribal enemies of an ethnic or racial people of God, this messiah, Christ Jesus, through and with the Holy Spirit, will bring our salvation and our healing and the reign of the Creator Father to the whole of existence, and the enemies Jesus will vanquish are the ultimate enemies of all – sin and evil and death

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbi Dei
The church reformed and the church always being reformed according to the Word of God.

And with your license:

The people of God reformed and the people of God always being reformed according to the Word of God.

And for all of us, my sisters and brothers, may that be a reformation truly worth living.
Amen.