First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

10/29/23

Reformed and Always Reforming

Matthew 22:34-40

**34**When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, **35**and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. **36**“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” **37**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.’ **38**This is the greatest and first commandment. **39**And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ **40**On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

At first glance, this seems like an odd passage to read on Reformation Sunday, doesn’t it? On the surface, it doesn’t seem to have any connection to the day where we celebrate the event that gave birth to the protestant church, and we were a bit stumped about how to connect this passage to this day at the Tuesday night Bible study. It’s almost as if the compilers of the Lectionary completely ignored Martin Luther’s efforts to bring about some badly needed change within the Church. I get it; not all churches who follow the lectionary celebrate Reformation Sunday, but for those preachers, such as myself, who want to follow the lectionary and celebrate the reformation, it poses a bit of a challenge. It did take a bit of thinking, on my part, but I believe I found a connection between Matthew’s words and Martin Luther’s actions.

So, let me start with what Matthew is describing here. The Pharisees are at it again, trying to trip Jesus up. This particular event happened later on the same day that the Pharisees had tried to box Jesus in with the question about whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, which we talked about last week. In between these two visits from the Pharisees, Jesus had to deal with the Sadducees, and their ridiculous questions about resurrection, which you can read about in verses 23-33 of this chapter. I imagine, by this time, Jesus was pretty sick and tired of having to deal with these hypocrites.

One Pharisees, who was a lawyer, asked Jesus to tell them what the greatest commandment under the law was. It was, of course, simply another attempt to trap Jesus. But Jesus, being well aware of the fact that these highly trained, religious men already knew the answer, quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, which reads, ***“****You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”*  He goes on to add the second commandment found in verse 39 of the Matthew reading, where we hear, *‘And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’* In verse 40, of today’s reading, he tells them, that on these two commandments hang all of the Law and the Prophets. In linking these two commandments, I believe Jesus was connecting the Abrahamic covenant with the new covenant, as embodied in his own teachings which, in turn, provides us with the foundational principles of what the church is, or should be.

Martin Luther was living into these core values, as outlined by Jesus, by challenging the practice of selling indulgences; which in essence meant that you could simply buy your way into heaven. This practice of buying one’s way into heaven had nothing to do with living the gospel, so it certainly didn’t honor God. In addition, it created a system where only people with enough money could get into heaven, creating a system of “us versus them,” which never comes off as loving your neighbor, in my opinion.

For us Presbyterians, our belief that we are Reformed and always Reforming, builds on what Luther started 507 years ago. What I mean by that is that we, as Presbyterians, count ourselves as part of the reformation, and at the same time, we understand that the work that Martin Luther began isn’t finished yet.

What this also means, is that we believe in the importance of listening to the Holy Spirit and become willing to follow that still small voice even when it’s unpopular. Let me give you a couple of examples: For almost 200 years, the Presbyterian Church would not ordain women to the offices of Deacon, Elder or to the Ministry. It wasn’t biblical, the argument went. Yet, the Holy Spirit kept working on the church and we started seeing women being ordained deacons and elders in the 1920s and ‘30s, and the female Presbyterian minister was ordained in the mid-1950s.

Although it took much longer, the same Spirit that led the church to change its view regarding women’s ordination, was at work when the church opened ordination to members of the LGBTQ community in the early 2000s.

Neither of these actions were popular in the wider Christian Church or, frankly, in some quarters of our own denomination. Sadly, both of these actions caused splits within the Presbyterian Church, where entire congregations withdrew to form new Presbyterian denominations, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and the Presbyterian Church in America over the ordination of women and the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians over the ordination of LGBTQ persons.

In taking action to widen the church’s understanding of who God calls to ministry, did our denomination stray from scripture, as many have suggested? I would argue that the answer to that question is a resounding no. Rather, the Presbyterian Church USA, by listening to the Holy Spirit, began to read and understand scripture in a different light. The church started to understand the context in which passages that barred women from ordination, or condemned gay folk, had been written, realizing that those words had been written for a specific time and situation and are not meant to be universal prohibitions. By understanding this, I believe the church has lived into the two greatest commandments given by Jesus, to love God and to love neighbor.

If we expand on the idea of being reformed and always reforming; if listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit is actually what we, as the church, are called to do, then we need to also look at our relationships with other faiths.

There was a time when our denomination was actively hostile to other way of worshiping God. Again, it has only been through a willingness to embrace the idea of always reforming, by listening to the voice of God speaking through the Holy Spirit, did we begin to see a shift in our denomination’s views of other faiths.

Unfortunately, there is still work to be done in this area, particularly in regard to how the Presbyterian Church views the LDS Church. The official stance of our denomination is that the LDS Church is not a Christian Church. Obviously, I disagree with that position and I don’t believe that this position shows a love of God or neighbor, to be honest. I will continue to pray for the day when the Holy Spirit moves on the hearts and minds of our leaders and the promise found in John 6:37, which reads, *“****37****Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away,”* will be fully accepted by our denomination.

We can and should be proud to be part of a tradition that is open to new ways of understanding scripture. We can and should be proud of being part of a tradition that understands that loving God and loving neighbor looks different for many of us. We can and should be proud of being part of a tradition that continues to celebrate the history of the Reformation, while at the same time, understands that there is still work to do.

I’ll close with this thought from Rabbi Johnathan Sack, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. He writes that, *“For though my faith is not yours and your faith is not mine, if we are each free to light our own flame, together we can banish some of the darkness of the world.”*

Siblings in Christ, may we continue to honor the rich heritage that the Reformation has given us and at the same time, may we continue to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit; as we continue the work of being reformed, so that we may fully live into the commandment to love Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves AMEN