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**Reformation Sunday/Dedication Sunday
“Reformed and Always Reforming”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
October 29, 2017**

Matthew 22: 34-46; Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; 1Thessalonians 2: 1-8

Trending on Facebook every year or so is a funny collection of test questions and the answers given by clever children who, when they don't know the answer the teacher is looking for, come up with a substitute answer that will at least give their teacher a laugh. For example:

History test: Where was the Declaration of Independence signed?

“At the bottom.”

Geology test: Name three things found on earth that are not found on the moon:

“Lady Gaga, football, and cookie dough ice cream.”

Math test: Is this number odd or even (68) “even” – How do you know? “Because I'm smart.”

In our passage for today, Jesus faces his own test question and provides the test-giver with an answer he isn't expecting. The test-giver was a teacher of the law, a Pharisee, and he asks Jesus only one question.

It was meant to be a hard question. It was meant to be a question with no real answer. It was meant to be a trap, really. After all, Jesus had already silenced the Sadducees. The Pharisees knew they had better find a way to silence Jesus before something really bad happened – before things went to hell in a hand basket, so to speak, and people stopped following the law and the prophets and started following this Jesus. So, one of the Pharisees, an expert in the law, asked Jesus a point-blank question: “Okay, if you are so smart, which is the greatest commandment?”

Jesus knew this was a test, of course, but he didn't skip a beat. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” His answer was a part of the Shema, words known well by every faithful Jew, repeated daily from Deuteronomy 6:5. With this answer, Jesus was well within the bounds of orthodoxy. To this first and greatest commandment, though, he adds a second, as if you can't have one without the other. This time he quotes Leviticus 19, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And he closes

by saying, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Like a hammock that you can’t lie on with only one side attached to a tree, or like a swing you can’t sit on with only one side hooked to the top bar, so it is with the law and the prophets depending upon these two commandments – both are required - love God and love your neighbor.

Jesus’ answer is not the one the lawyer is looking for, of course. The lawyer understands that there are 613 rules that good Jewish people were to follow every day in every situation of life. Jesus didn’t name one of them. Instead, Jesus named the underlying theme in *all* of them. “What Jesus claims [writes Tom Long] is that the whole law is about love, not rules, about really loving God and one’s neighbor, not about figuring out how to avoid stepping on cracks in the legal sidewalk.”¹

Loving God isn’t so hard most of the time, we tend to think. After all, God loves us. But the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves is not so easy to follow. After all, we have conditions regarding our love. You know what I mean. It is easy to love others *if* they love us, *if* they follow the rules as we have established them, *if* they are like us.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 255.

But what if they aren't all of these things? What if they don't meet the conditions of our love?

Jesus makes it clear throughout Matthew's gospel: there are no conditions to love. There are no ifs, ands, or buts. Every law worthy of obeying hangs on the two greatest commandments of all – love God and love neighbor. If you truly love God, you will love your neighbor. In loving your neighbor, you show your love for God. Everything else falls into place when we abide by the commandments to love.

Jesus teaches us that the overarching message of love of God is to love the *other*, whoever that person is, however different (Jew or Samaritan, male or female, blind or sighted, sick or well, and all that is in between). Reformer John Calvin extends his own understanding of the definition of a neighbor in such a way that no one is excluded, not one, as all are made in God's image and all therefore are worthy of the same love we give to God:

[W]e ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek,

worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves.²

Love, therefore, is not given only to those who are within a close proximity, who are related, or who are friends or acquaintances. Love is given not because we have examined the other and judged that person worthy of our love. Love is given because we have seen that person through the eyes of our gracious God. God is in the other. Calvin makes this clear:

Therefore, if we rightly direct our love, we must first turn our eyes not to [humanity], the sight of whom would more often engender hate than love, but to God, who bids us extend to all . . . , the love we bear to him, that this may be an unchanging principle: Whatever the character of the man [sic], we must yet love him because we love God.³

How, then, could we say we see God in one another and treat our neighbor as less than human, as unworthy of love? How could we treat those whose race, culture, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, intellect, or socio-economic status is different than our own, as if they were less than human and

² Marilynne Robinson quotes John Calvin (I think from the *Institutes*, Book 2, VIII, 55, but she doesn't cite the exact source of her reference). The quote is found in *The Death of Adam* (New York: Picador, 2005), 172.

³ Calvin uses masculine language for humanity and God. While this is not the language I would choose, I keep most of it here (with one exception) to honor that which was written at the time. See footnote 1 above.

still claim to love God and neighbor? If we do not love one another the way God loves all humanity, we do not truly love God.

I believe, friends, that the Church of the 21st century cannot be Christ's Church if we do not hang our own lives on the greatest two commandments, to love God and to love one another. I believe also that we cannot be Christ's Church if we do not recognize, claim, and respond to the injustices happening to our neighbors here in Durham and around the world. Though I am not smart enough or brave enough to be a 21st century Martin Luther, I do believe that as we celebrate the Reformation of 500 years ago, we must also seek to discern the ways that we are called to reform the injustices in our Church and in our world today.

Thus, in honor of this great anniversary, I assert (in no particular order) the following.

The Church cannot be Christ's Church:

1. When sexual abuse, misconduct, and harassment are not loudly and immediately confronted, in the church, in business, in our schools and universities, and in any place where power is used for advantage and control and where victims are left in voiceless fear;

2. When racism continues to be girded up by our systems and history, when discrimination is ignored by those in power, and when white privilege continues to provide advantages that go unrecognized and/or are denied by recipients;
3. If we ignore the way poverty grows all around us and the basic needs of so many go unmet every day – food, housing, clothing, safety, education, health care;
4. If we ignore the fact that mass incarceration has spiraled out of control, and that those who are not white are arrested and convicted at much higher rates than their white counterparts, and that any time in prison makes it almost impossible to get a job and build a new life;
5. If we deny or ignore the rise of carbon emissions, the melting of glaciers, the rising of sea levels, the increase in intensity and frequency of storms, the endangering of species, the loss of wooded land for the sake of progress, and the drastic effects of global warming on the poorest communities who pay with their lives and their homes. We cannot be Christ's church if we pretend this damage to God's creation is inevitable, unpreventable, and just the way it is;

6. When we do not offer support for the mentally ill, when we close down hospitals and facilities that care for those who are most in need, when we do not educate ourselves and others about mental illness in such a way that we erase any stigma and find ways to provide adequate and appropriate support for families and individuals who are in need of help;
7. When we dictate to others what gender means to them, and we set in place gender norms that exclude many who are non-gendered, or gender non-conforming;
8. When we ignore the plight of our Spanish-speaking friends who live in fear of arrest, jail, and deportation, or if we respond to them with hostility rather than hospitality;

As Christ's Church, we must:

1. work to ensure that all people receive the health care they need;
2. work to provide for non-discriminatory educational opportunities for all children and adequate pay for teachers;
3. question unethical behavior in business, sports, religion, and politics;
4. be disturbed by and fight against the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the consumer-driven marketplace in which we live that

tells us we need more, deserve more, and should acquire more for the sake of acquisition;

5. [As Christ's Church] we must not avoid talking to one another because we are afraid of the things that divide us – politics, especially, but also religion, race, and culture.

6. not be satisfied with the way things are and we must not believe there is nothing we can do to change the status quo.

I am happy to say that the Presbyterian Church works to fight injustice in all of these areas, and so do we here at First Presbyterian Church. Can we do more? Of course! But we already work hard in many ways to combat these injustices around us – in our work as a church and in our individual vocational callings from God. As we recognize these injustices and challenge ourselves to care for and love our neighbors, we will continue to work for peace, justice, and hope for all of God's children. Does this sound exhausting? It shouldn't, if we realize that God is in control. It won't be, if and when we live guided by God's grace, if and when we live not to save the world on our own but to partner with all God's people around the world so that Christ's light might shine brightly – full of grace, full of peace, full of love.

Long ago, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) chose its motto very carefully – *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* – the church reformed; always reforming. If we are truly to honor our reformed past, we must always examine ourselves and our church locally and globally as we seek to understand what it means to follow Jesus – what it means to love God and to love one another.

Sings Jean Valjean in the musical *Les Miserables*, “To love another person is to see the face of God.” We look in the face of another and we see *God’s* face and we love them because we love God. And we love God because God first loved us.

Love is the center. Love has always been the center. Even the smallest children know it. Remember the test questions I mentioned earlier? Another child took a science test which included the question, “What is the strongest force on earth?” The child knew the answer. “Love,” scribbled the young handwriting.

The strongest force on earth is love. So be it.

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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