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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
Reformation Sunday/Ordinary 30 (Year A-08)

I Thessalonians 2: 1-8
Matthew 22: 34-40

Still Trying to Get it Right After All This Time

The goal of Christianity is simple enough: if you want to love God, start by loving others. The message is easy; the living it out, that is the hard part. How can I be so sure the message is that straightforward and simple? Because, Jesus just told us so!

Today's Gospel lesson is a continuation of the religious authorities' attempts to try to trap Jesus and get him in trouble. You'll remember last week they ask him about paying taxes to the emperor. Now they are back to the basics: the commandments. Like the others, today's question seems to be fairly benign at first, but as we know from recent political campaigns, a simple word or phrase out of place can be used to draw broad conclusions by one's opponents. That's what the expert in the law of Moses is trying to do. The Pharisees have sent him to outwit and outplay Jesus. And his question, while seeming simple, is actually deceptively complicated. It is commonly thought among Jewish scholars that there are no fewer than 613 commandments in the five books of Moses.

By getting Jesus to pick one of the 613, they are hoping to expose him to criticism. We can imagine the lawyers' follow up to Jesus' answer: "So what you're saying is that the other 612 aren't important? Hey everybody, this Jesus character is telling us to ignore all of the commandments but one. He thinks we can pick and choose." It seems desperate tactic, but still to this day politicians and pundits use similar maneuvers to characterize opponents, and, unfortunately, all too often it works.

But Jesus, as has become his pattern in these traps, recognizes what the lawyer is trying to do and uses it to his advantage. In response to the question he goes right to scripture, Deuteronomy 6:5 to be precise, and recites the passage every Jewish child learns by heart, the Shema: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” In many ways, this is the safe answer because it puts him right in line with his Jewish tradition. The lawyer, cannot, without incriminating himself, argue against Jesus’ choice. But, if Jesus had stopped here, his opponent might still be able to paint him as someone who is out of touch with the common Jew.

But of course Jesus does not stop there. Not only does he not fall into the trap, he doesn’t accept the lawyer’s question as a valid one. You cannot pick one or divide up the commandments, Jesus’ responds: “The second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two hang all the law and the prophets.” They are all connected, and not only the law, did you notice that Jesus threw the prophets in there as well? It’s as if he wants us to know that it can all be boiled down to the simple formula, we love God by loving others. And that is why I say the message of Christianity, the message that Jesus himself preaches is simple. But it’s the living out the message that is the tough part. Did you notice how Jesus’ response also exposes the lawyer’s hypocrisy? Here he is trying to deviously trap Jesus using the very law that tells us we should love one another. He may have been an expert in terms of knowledge of the law, but he sure doesn’t seem to be good at applying it to his own life? And just to make sure we don’t fall into the same trap, we need to acknowledge how difficult it is for us to love others as well.

On the bulletin cover are the words of the poet Rilke, who wrote, “to love is good for love is difficult.” I love this simple phrase because it reminds us of something very important and that is what makes love so worthwhile is how challenging it is for us. Notice he is not saying love is worth it, even though it is difficult. What Rilke says, and I think it points to what Jesus is saying, is that it is *because it is difficult* that it is good for us. The work of love is the epitome of our lives, our greatest calling is to love. It connects us, not only with each other, but with who we are meant to be.

As one theologian writes, “In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can as easily produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can a yawn or a sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end” (Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words*, pp.231-232).

This is why Paul writes in his letter to the Thessalonians. “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our very own selves.” You see we can be like the expert in the law, we can fill our heads with all the wisdom scripture & tradition has to offer, but if we don’t apply it to our own lives then, as another famous passage on love reminds us, we are like a noisy gong or clanging symbol. In other words, not much good at all. The message, that’s simple, the application is what is so difficult, but also what makes it our life’s greatest work.

As Presbyterians we are part of a tradition that recognizes just how difficult this calling actually is to live out. Today as we celebrate our reformed heritage and tradition, what we need to remember is that we are still trying to get it right after all this time. That is part of what is meant by the reformation slogan: reformed and always reforming. We don't ever get to claim we have arrived, and in large part, I think it is fair to say that is the sentiment the reformers were protesting against beginning 491 years ago when Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany. The reformation wasn't about a group of unhappy members leaving the Church, it was about reforming the Church and getting back to basics. When that didn't happen, and the reformers left or were told to leave, they didn't lose their desire to live out their faith in community, so they did what was natural and formed their own communities. As they did, they remembered to make one of their guiding rules openness to the continual work of the Spirit in their lives and in the life of their communities. Or put another way, open to the hard work of love, which never quits on us and challenges us to grow our whole lives long.

William Sloan Coffin puts it well, "It is bad religion to deify doctrines and creeds. While indispensable to religious life, doctrines and creeds are only so as signposts. Love alone is the hitching post. Doctrines let us not forget, supported slavery and apartheid; some still support keeping women in their places and gays and lesbians in limbo. In other words, religious folk, all our lives, have both to recover tradition and recover from it" (*Credo*, p.9).

Eboo Patel, an American Muslim, tells a story which, I believe, illustrates the significance of valuing people over creeds, especially in a world such as ours where we too often seek to divide ourselves along ideological lines. He writes, "I attended high school in the western suburbs of Chicago. The group I ate lunch with included a Jew, a Mormon, a Hindu, a Catholic and a Lutheran. We were all devout to a degree, but we almost never talked about religion. Somebody would announce at the table that they couldn't eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a period of time. We all knew religion hovered behind this, but nobody ever offered any explanation deeper than "my mom said," and nobody ever asked for one. A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend from the lunchroom reminded me of an experience we both wish had never happened. A group of thugs in our high school had taken to scrawling anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks and shouting them in the hallway. I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend. Instead I averted my eyes from their bigotry, and I avoided my friend because I couldn't stand to face him. My friend told me he feared coming to school those days, and he felt abandoned as he watched his close friends do nothing. Hearing him tell me of his suffering and my complicity is the single most humiliating experience of my life. My friend needed more than my silent presence at the lunch table. I realize now that to believe in pluralism means I need the courage to act on it. Action is what separates a belief from an opinion. Beliefs are imprinted through actions. In the words of the great American poet Gwendolyn Brooks: "We are each other's business; we are each other's harvest; we are each other's magnitude and bond" (From NPR: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4989625>).

The message of our faith is easy to grasp: to love God we must love each other. The living it out, that is that part we are still trying to get right, even after all this time. But the fact that we are still trying to get it right is not cause to feel bad about ourselves, it should be reason to convince us of the worthiness of the goal and the importance of our journey. The trying is the thing; it's the epitome of our lives, our greatest calling. But, as Martin Luther reminds us, "Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing" (*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*).

Let us pray: *We give you thanks O God for those who have gone before us and reminded us that while doctrines and creeds can be sign posts, your love alone is the hitching post. And help us, O Lord, to strive to live with love toward neighbor and stranger, friend and enemy, that we may more and more reflect your love in the world and more and more learn who we are meant to be. In the name and for the sake of Jesus we pray. Amen.*