

Reformation, October 25, 2020 (Matthew 22:34-40; Ps 46; Leviticus 19:1-2. 15-18)

The Holy Gospel according to Matthew, the 22nd chapter (22:34-40)

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees (22:23-33), the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

This is the gospel of our Lord.

When something of spiritual import happens unexpectedly in my life, I sit up and take notice. That happened to me in preparing for this Reformation sermon. I took the texts from my Missouri Synod Lutheran desk calendar, and they coincided with my two Methodist daily devotionals. It wasn't until I sat down to select hymns for the worship time that I realized they weren't the traditional Reformation texts. By then I'd formed a pretty clear picture of what I wanted to say, so I'm sticking with the non-Reformation texts (though I did print Psalm 46, Luther's favorite psalm, as the Call to Worship).

The book of Leviticus is the third of the five “books of Moses,” or “Law of Moses,” otherwise known as the *Pentateuch* (meaning *five books*) at the beginning of the Bible. Many of my sermons during the past few months have emphasized social justice as described in the scriptures (the *writings*, the Word of God, the way God reveals himself and his will to us). Today's texts call for another such sermon.

It's important for us to remember that Jesus' death was highly political. Crucifixion was a means of death reserved for political insurrectionists and criminals, and it was meant to be an especially humiliating and public way to die. This was the end that awaited Jesus during his three years of ministry, three years that were filled with in-your-face opposition to the Jewish rulers and other leaders—the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the scribes (lawyers) and the elders.

Jewish law—largely based on the book of Leviticus—covered every aspect of life: personal behavior, family relationships, manner of speaking, education, work, politics, farming, shaving—you name it, and it was subject to the Law of Moses. Think about the people Jesus ministered to, especially his healings (especially on the Sabbath!), and you can understand why he was viewed by men of faith as a rabble-rouser, a subversive.

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Read again some of the words from Leviticus: **Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.**

Since the murder of George Floyd I've invested many hours in reading books about the history that's led to the Black Lives Matter issue. One phrase has been used over and over: **Jim Crow**.

"Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. These laws were enacted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by white Southern Democrat-dominated state legislatures to disenfranchise, and remove political and economic gains made by, black people during the Reconstruction period. The Jim Crow laws were enforced until 1965" (Wikipedia).

1965 was the year I graduated from high school! And there were still lynchings and segregation and gross racial prejudice going on in my childhood. I don't know about lynchings now, but we are still in an age of unfair, unjust application of the law.

I DO NOT blame or want to defund the police! But *something* must be done to ensure that *all* people receive fair treatment at the hands of all those who enact and enforce the laws of the United States, and of each jurisdiction in this "one nation under God."

In the words of Leviticus, we read **love your neighbor as yourself**. When Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbor?" he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. By the end of that story, it was revealed that we're all neighbors to each other.

This is the same message Jesus speaks in today's gospel verses. A lawyer asked 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 these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." In line with this, he had said earlier (Matthew 5:17), "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

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There are many denominations in this country that call themselves Christian but don't follow the words or example of Jesus. What does "Christian" mean if it doesn't involve living like Christ?

When we follow Jesus, we're called to his ministry to the poor, the sick, the prisoners, the hungry, the stranger; the disadvantaged, the misfits, the addicts; the widow and the orphan. We're commanded to welcome the refugee among us; to hear—and *respond to*—the cries of those who are hungry and homeless; to work for justice for the mentally and physically challenged. We're commanded to break down social and legal systems that oppress and imprison a disproportionate number of black and brown people.

These things Christ calls us to do. And these Christian values are often in conflict with the actions of our political leaders, both local and nation-wide. But how can we call ourselves "Christian" if we ignore the teachings and example of Jesus, the Christ, whom God sent into the world **not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him** (John 3:17).

The Old Testament reading for Reformation is from Jeremiah (31:31-34): **The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: *I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.***

The God to whom we belong hears our cries: the groaning of a wounded world whose climate is changing. The deep grief of those who've lost loved ones from the coronavirus, or in disasters or acts of terrorism, or as a result of gun violence. God hears the anger and pain of victims of discrimination, and the prayers of those who suffer because of the color of their skin, or because of the country in which they were born, or because of their immigration status. God hears the despair of young people who are mocked, bullied, or shamed, and who wonder if it's worth continuing in this world. God hears the cries of our hearts, our desires, even the yearnings that are hidden from ourselves. God hears our cries, spoken and unspoken, known and unknown.

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God hears our cries and longs to comfort us, to heal us. The most important consolation of all is the forgiveness of our sins, for which he died.

I close with a passage from Exodus 33. It's a dialogue between the Lord and Moses. For 18 chapters Moses and his flock of Hebrews have been wandering in the wilderness, and Moses often talks to God. Sometimes Moses isn't quite sure God means what he says. In these verses Moses is reminding God that **"this nation is your people."** **The Lord replied, "My Presence will go with you." . . . Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?" . . . And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. . . . But you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."**

This is Old Testament theology: the pure holiness and glory of God are so powerful that no one can see him face to face and live. Yet the people know God! They crave his Presence on their journey in the wilderness, and his leadership to the Promised Land. And the Lord states unequivocally that he is pleased with Moses and that he knows him by name. – How much more does the Lord know *us*, who have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever!

The Lord knows how much Moses wants to see his glory, but he won't risk Moses' safety. Therefore, when his glory passes by he will hide Moses in a cleft in the rock and cover him with his hand until he has passed by. -- We, now God's chosen people, are covered by much more than his hand. We are covered by the blood of Jesus! Our sins are forgiven, our guilt is washed away, and we live in the eternal presence of God, now and always!

*The irony is that we never actually get to see God's backside.
God never turns away from us.*