

October 29, 2023, Reformation Sunday

Matthew 22:34-46

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One day God was watching Earth and saw all of the bad stuff that was going on. God decided to send an angel to Earth to check it out. When the angel returned he told God, yes – things are not going well. On earth, 95% is bad and 5% is good. Well, God said, maybe I had better get a second opinion. So God sent another angel to earth. When the angel returned she told God, sure enough, the earth was in bad shape. 95% was bad and 5% was good.

And God said, this is not good. So God decided to text the 5% that were good, to encourage them, give them a little something to help them keep going. Do you know what that text said? You didn't get one either, huh?

On this Reformation Sunday, it's good to be reminded that in the 5 % and the 95%, God's love through the Holy Spirit has reformed, and is always reforming us! On October 31, (506 years ago), Martin Luther set forth his concerns about the ways the church had strayed from the Biblical good news. Well, today, we get the heart of it: Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

In Martin Luther's words; "Everyone should 'put on' the neighbor and act toward him or her as if we were in the neighbor's place." This is not easy, as the human inclination is to choose to love only those we find easy to accept and to love. The "others" tend to fall onto our unacknowledged list of those who seem unworthy, and unredeemable. That list sometimes includes our friends and family members how have wronged us. Loving the neighbor is about owning our connection to one another. And it's about mercy.

The heartbreak of war in Gaza and Israel weighs heavily right now. We see, tragically, the devastation that happens when we fail to love our neighbors. From our reading, Matthew 22, the Pharisee, asks a vitally important question: which law is the greatest? Jesus responds by saying, all the law, and the prophets' messages, boil down to these two Bible passages: The first part, from Deuteronomy 6:5: Love God with all our heart, soul, mind; The second part comes from Leviticus 19:18. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This Golden Rule is shared by Judaism and Christianity. But Islam, too shares a similar rule: "The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "None of you will have faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbor what he loves for himself."

Think of that: Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all in agreement on the command to love the neighbor. It's the heart of all three faiths, and it's not an ideology: it's a practice.

Why, then, are things so broken? I think the root of our problem is thinking similar to that Pharisee. He asked: Who's my neighbor? But the question implies: who's NOT my neighbor? Who can I leave off? Whom do I have permission to despise? God calls us to a higher level.

Palestinian Christian Naim Ateek said that "So long as we divide the world and our own communities into friends and enemies, neighbors and strangers, we feel no moral obligation towards those whom we have already designated as outsiders."

But, in Jesus time, and now, we separate "us" from "them". When we've narrowed the Gospel and our love, to something easy; when we have neglected mercy; when we go along with rhetoric against immigrants; when we've assumed we're being Christian enough when we just love people on a similar economic scale, who speak the same language, who are familiar-looking—we've unconsciously created a list that defines "neighbor" too narrowly. When we do that, we have neglected the mercy that God lavishes on us and calls us to share.

Martin Luther wrote "I will, therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me. I will do nothing in this life except what is profitable for my neighbor since through faith, I have an abundance of all good things in Christ."

Friends, over the past decade, I've noticed that there seems to be more and more permission to feel and express contempt. The list of people it's okay to hate, seems to have expanded. This attitude even infects friendships. Tolerance seems to be wearing more and more thin.

Arthur Brooks, writer of *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt* noted that ". . . We form communities where – we don't associate with other people [with whom we vehemently disagree]. But, in point of fact the greatness of the United States is persuading each other and making progress in terms of our values. And the only way that we can do that, if we are firmly convinced that our ideas are right, is by showing love to other people, and especially love when we're treated with hatred. Now, I understand that's hard. But if you want to persuade it's the only way."

Pope Francis has said: "I think we are the people who, on the one hand, want to listen to Jesus, but on the other hand, at times, like to find a stick to beat others with, to condemn others. But, Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think — and I say it with humility — that this is the Lord's most powerful message: mercy."

In our scripture, who was the good neighbor? The one who chose to put himself in the shoes of the other. The one who risked the uncomfortable task of loving the enemy.

Make no mistake, when Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of the story, he upended expectations in shocking way. For Judeans, the Samaritan was not only an outsider. He was an enemy. Although the religious people in Jesus' world well knew the command to "love your neighbor as yourself," the prevailing attitudes meant that most people would never have thought to view a Samaritan as "neighbor." In Jesus story, the enemy became the model for those who viewed

themselves above him. That would be like making someone from Hamas into a spiritual example. It was shocking; it was confusing; it was offensive.

The Gospel shifts our perspective. To follow Jesus means to no longer divide people into separated groups (neighbors and non-neighbors). Instead, we should ask ourselves, Am I a good neighbor? Am I showing mercy in my life? Are we showing mercy?

Are there people in our lives that we feel justified in writing of our list to love? Now, I want to be clear: there are situations of abuse and wrongs that require healthy boundaries, and sometimes, even a severed relationship. BUT, by God's grace, we need to let mercy mend our hearts, so that even in a situation of being wronged, we do not choose vengeance and hate. Instead, we let the love of Christ transform our hearts.

Friends, God is already at work in the world showing mercy where it is most needed in unexpected places. Using unexpected people.

I recently read that in the first week after Hamas attacked communities in Israel, two American orthodox rabbis in Chicago, attended the funeral of little child, Wadea al-Fayoume. Wadea was a Muslim, Palestinian-American boy murdered by his family's landlord because of his faith and identity, in response to the conflict in Israel. His mother, Hanaan Shahin, was also repeatedly stabbed and is hospitalized.

These rabbis were part of *Solu*, the bridge-building initiative in Chicago. Among other things, they have built a literacy center for kids; distributed food, and released medical debt. We've built bridges to the Rohingya Muslim community, a group of refugees bearing the scars of religious persecution. We've resettled a Guatemalan refugee family, and fed the homeless down the street. Their support for the father of Wadea was meant to bear the simple message:

"You are not alone. You are our Palestinian-American neighbors."

On this Sunday, as we celebrate the way the Spirit has reformed and is reforming us, I wonder if we could get better at seeing where God is already working out mercy and grace? What if we got better at seeing where God is at work in the world, and we joined in? Especially when the one we are engaging with is Samaritan. Or Muslim. Or Israeli. Republican. Or Democrat. Or, well, you fill in the blank.

Mercy. What will the church be when there is no one off the list of loving? What would the world be like? What would you be, what would we be, if mercy became our first concern?

Pray. Love your enemy, and pray for those who harm you.

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