



The Greatest Commandment & Reformation

Matthew 22:34-46

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October 26, 2014 — Reformation Sunday

20th Sunday after Pentecost



Today is Reformation Sunday — the day that we celebrate and reflect on our peculiar Lutheran heritage. Today is also the 20th Sunday after Pentecost. Our Gospel lesson for this day is the greatest commandment: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37//Deuteronomy 6:5). We hear Jesus pair this first and greatest commandment with a second that is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:38//Leviticus 19:18). Jesus tells us that on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. The phrase all the law and the prophets is shorthand for all of scripture. Everything in the Bible - all of Scripture, says Jesus, is centered around the concepts of love God, love neighbor, love one’s self. Jesus’ point is that loving God with all our heart, soul and mind makes us better able to love ourselves and each other in ways that are healthy, in ways that promote wholeness and flourishing for all.

You may be wondering why I am connecting the greatest commandment with Reformation Sunday? Traditional reading for Reformation Sunday is John 8. Why should we reflect on the greatest commandment today when we are celebrating our peculiar Lutheran heritage? For me the connection occurs at the level of iconic images and symbols. Icons function as windows into deeper spiritual realities. Symbols sum up, represent and express spiritual truths that are sometimes hard to put into a few words.

The iconic image and symbol of the great commandment to love God, neighbor and self is, of course, a heart. The image that here represents the greatest commandment is a deep, red heart. It is composed of many, many smaller red hearts that take the place of the leaves on the tree. This image reminds me that love of God and neighbor together with a healthy love of self is not something that we conjure up on our own. Rather it is rooted in God’s love for us, demonstrated most profoundly in the life, teaching, healing, dying and rising of Jesus Christ. Love of God, neighbor and self is symbolized here as a heart of hearts growing out of Christ’s love for us.

Beside this image we have the Luther Rose. This seal was designed for Martin Luther about 1530. He used it to authorize his personal correspondence. Luther regarded this seal as a symbol of his theology. At the center is a black cross in a red heart which for Luther expressed his conviction that faith in Jesus Christ our crucified and risen Lord saves us. The healthy red heart centered in a white rose shows that faith in Christ brings joy, comfort and peace. The blue background tells us that this joy, comfort and peace we experience now is already the beginning of heaven, a beginning that will be completed in God’s time. The gold ring symbols eternity. We might sum up the message of the Luther Rose something like this: faith in the crucified and risen Christ as the

source of life and salvation empowers us to experience now already some of the joy, comfort and peace of heaven as a foretaste of the eternal feast to come.

But here's the thing about icons, images and symbols: they always have multiple levels of meaning. The black cross in the red heart points to the crucified and risen Christ who loves me and claimed me in the waters of baptism. The black cross in the red heart points to the crucified and risen Christ to whom I give my heart every time I publicly affirm my faith. The black cross in the red heart takes me back to the great commandment to love the God made known in the crucified and risen Christ with all my heart, all my soul and all my mind. The black cross in the red heart reminds me that the crucified and risen Christ loves me, died for me, promises to walk with me all the days of my life, will be present with me always, and will carry me through the valley of the shadow of death into eternity. The black cross in the red heart is a symbol both of Christ's love for me and my love for Christ. The Luther Rose reminds me that only when my heart clings to the cross of Christ can I flourish and blossom like a rose here and now and forever.

The Luther Rose reminds us that discipleship is ultimately a matter of the heart. Emma Witt, who will be confirmed this morning, describes it like this in her confirmation essay: "Being a Christian means you are changed on the inside — not controlled from the outside. It means that your heart has been changed by the presence of God. It does not mean that you are required to go to church, required to pay tithes, required to do anything in order to stay a Christian. It means you desire to do those things because you've been changed." I think the Luther Rose with its black cross in a red heart sums up nicely Emma's understanding of Christian discipleship as having your heart changed by the presence of God. The rose represents the way that our lives blossom as we engage more deeply in sacred practices of worship and study, hospitality and service, sharing and witness.

The Reformation was not just an event that happened long ago in a country far away. What Martin Luther started was a movement - a movement committed to change. The Lutheran movement of reform, calls us to change and keep changing the way we think, feel and act in relation to God, neighbor and self not just on Sunday mornings but every day, all day, in our homes, at work, at school, at play, and yes even when we are carrying out our civic duties.

St. Stephen's is very much a church of the great commandment. Our welcome statement takes as its biblical foundation Jesus' commandment that we love one another as he has loved us (John 13:34). The great commandment is at the heart of who we are and what we are about as a community of faith. The heart of St. Stephen's is in the right place, but sometimes our efforts to love God, neighbor and self runs up against the hard reality of squirmy, noisy children, over-committed youth and families, members who are too proud or too ashamed or too afraid of losing their independence to ask for the help they desperately need, the unpredictability of Family Promise guests, a chronic lack of time, energy and money.

I recently read that loving our neighbor requires preparation, practice and perspiration. It will undoubtedly require preparation, practice, perspiration and patience, as we make space in our worship for our youngest members, as our Stephen Ministry Team walks alongside members experiencing difficulties in life, as our Seniors Support Network reaches out to our elders, as we continue to open our doors to shelter and feed homeless families, as we work to develop our relationship with our companion parish in Tanzania, as we face the reality of building repairs, and more.

The great commandment is symbolized here by this image of a heart of hearts blossoming on a tree. The black cross in the red heart at the center of the Luther Rose reminds us that Christ's love for us is the heart and root and foundation of all we do.

Please pray with me:

Blessed are you, O Christ, for coming to call us to love: to love you without reservation, to love others without expectation, to love ourselves without self-condemnation. Give us the patience to prepare, practice and perspire as we grow in love. Amen.