

The Reformation: “One Thing is Needful”

Luke 10:25-42

A sermon for Reformation Sunday

The festival of the Reformation is often not celebrated today because it was long ago and things have changed. It took place in a university and involved complicated and abstract thinking. Now things are different. We are no longer fighting with the Catholics, and the important thing is to look to the future, work ahead, and not be focused on the past. But the “one thing needful” (Luke 10:42) has been lost.

A large downtown church in Minneapolis began their worship with this responsive reading:

Leader: Love the Lord your God.

Response: We come with love and hope.

L: Love your neighbors, too.

R: We come with loving hearts.

L: Love even yourself.

R: We come in humble trust.

L: Love and you will live.

R: We come to worship that God’s love might live in us.

This litany about love is not really Christian. It’s a kind of made-up religion. But the text from Luke includes the famous double command: “Love the Lord your God . . . and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). We think we’re supposed to love God and each other, but that’s a distortion of what Christianity is about!

This distortion amounts to is something different from Luke 10:25-42 and different from what the New Testament is about. If you take seriously what it says, Christianity is quite different. We have this made-up religion of love, spelled “Luv.” As the song goes: “Luv, luv, luv, that’s what it’s all about.” Or as someone has said: “God is nice, we are nice, isn’t that nice.” That’s not what Christianity is about. But it’s easy to see how people get caught in thinking that’s what Christianity is all about.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke it says very simply: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:25-28).

There's a sermon by Luther on this text. It's a whole hour long. It's tempting to read it to you. He really comes down on what Christianity is about.

In the first of the two great Commandments, the word "and" is used three times, but the word "**all**" is used four times. "With **all** your heart, **all** your soul, **all** your strength, and **all** your mind."

Luther zeros in on "with all your heart." How do we listen to this phrase? When it says "with all your heart," we think: "Yes Lord, I'm for you. I'm not against you. I like you. I have a positive attitude toward you."

And then when it says, "with all your soul." We think that probably means the same as "with all your heart." What about: "With all your strength"? I try my best. My intentions are good. I really want to.

"With all your mind." "Yes, Lord, I think positively about you. I affirm all your teachings. Whatever it is, I believe, I hold it."

Luther then zeros in: What does it mean "with all your heart"? He points out that means from within us, joyfully, spontaneously. The word that comes to mind is "religiously." We use "religiously" today in this way. We'll say of someone who runs five miles every day that he does it "religiously." He does it because he wants to; he never fails.

Or someone who has a particular thing he does, and we say he does it "religiously," by which we mean he's committed to it. He does it freely, from within, and he never fails because it is that important to him.

But when a Christian acts this way, taking his faith this seriously, it is said: "He's a fanatic." But what the New Testament says is: With all your heart, spontaneously, joyously. Not because God says you have to, but because you really want to because that's what Christianity is about. That's what it says. It doesn't say: Have good intentions about God. No. It says: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.

The second of the two Commandments really goes with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The First Commandment goes with the account of Mary and Martha and it goes like this:

"Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said: "Lord, do you not

care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

That's what it means to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.

The problem is serving coffee. It's the problem of saying: "Yes, there are all those things about eternity, but who's going to make coffee?"

We remember Luther's explanation to the Third Commandment in the Small Catechism: "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy."

What does this mean? "We should fear and love God so we do not despise his Word and the preaching of the same, but deem it holy and gladly hear and learn it."

It doesn't say you are not supposed to work on Sunday. What does it say? It's the coffee serving problem.

Notice what Jesus' response is: "One thing is needful" (Luke 10:42). This is parallel to: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind." It's really as if every Sunday every congregation has a million-dollar lottery where everyone wins the grand prize. The churches would be full. What about the coffee? That could be done some other way.

What's really important is what matters eternally. That's what it's about. It's not about working on Sunday, but as a rule of thumb, unless you are so ill that you are in bed, you should go to worship weekly, not necessarily on Sunday, because "one thing is needful." Mary has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away from her.

Then Jesus goes on with the Second Great Commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It's important to realize that this Commandment is found in other philosophies and religions. It's nothing unique. It's found in Leviticus 19:18 and in Buddhism, Islam, even in Bertrand Russell. It's a very practical commandment. It's behind the Seventh Commandment: "Thou shall not steal." Life doesn't work if we don't have private property. I have to have my own toothbrush. If my toothbrush is everybody's toothbrush, life doesn't work. It's really a basic, practical point of view of how life works. Love your neighbor. Of course, in Matt

5:44 it says even more: "You shall love your enemy," (which is also found outside of the Bible).

In the modern world, as in the Litany with which we began, it's often said that to love your neighbor you must first love yourself. That's not what the New Testament says. Rather, it says: You know how to love yourself; that tells you how to love others.

Loving oneself is big today because of the self-esteem movement. To be sure, this movement lost some steam once it was discovered that the people with the highest self-esteem are in prison, which blows apart the idea that low self-esteem is a major cause of crime.

People today confuse "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" with the great parable in Matthew 25:31-46 about the Last Judgment, the sheep and the goats. Remember, it says, if you gave a cup of water to someone, if you visited someone in prison, if you helped someone in need, you did the right thing. But the parable about the Last Judgment is not about that at all. It's about those who are "the least" ("the least" in Matthew is a technical term for itinerant Christian preachers). The point of any parable is always in the last verse, not in the details of the story.

What about the Good Samaritan? People get all caught up in the narrative. But it's important to remember in the Gospel of Luke that Luke emphasizes the lepers, the outcasts, the poor, and the Samaritans. He emphasizes the dregs of society. What he's doing here is sticking it to the Pharisees about the Samaritans. Luke 17:11-18 is the text which is used at Thanksgiving, of the ten lepers who were healed and only one came back to say thank you. And note that it says in Luke 17:16: "Now he was a Samaritan." Ha! Luke is once again sticking it to the Pharisees: "You don't do it. Others do better than you do." The final point of it all, and it's already in Deuteronomy 30:6: "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

But we don't do it; we can't do it. As Luther points out: We end up in spiritual pride or spiritual despair. Mostly we end up in spiritual pride: "I did the best I could and I'm better than so and so. I'm okay. But he, he's a hypocrite," without looking at the fact that you and I are greater hypocrites because it says: With all your heart, 100%.

Very rarely there is someone who ends up in spiritual despair because he faces what it really means and then realizes that we can't and we don't.

What is our only hope? In the New Testament and in the Reformation our only hope is in the cross and resurrection because in ourselves we end up either in spiritual pride or spiritual despair. The Lord “snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us his own” (Large Catechism, 4:83; Tappert 446; Kolb/Wengert 466). That the Lord helps us in spite of ourselves is our only hope. But it is our glorious hope, thanks be to God. Amen