

TWENTIETY SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 22:34-46

Northern Conference of the Michigan District, October 5, 2010

One of my history profs at Central likes to point out that the obvious things are the deepest, the simple things the most meaningful. His point is that the mark of a great historian is not the big words he uses or the obscure dates he cites, but how well he captures the spirit of an age, often found in the obvious and simple, distills it, and states it in an understandable way. The same rings true in theology, and Jesus, as the *Logos*, the revelation of the *Theos*, was understandably good at theology.

In our Holy Gospel, when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced their rivals, the Sadducees, they were determined to do better, to catch Jesus in a trap, stump Him, make Him look foolish. Sure, the Sadducees had been unable to do it, but they were Pharisees. And so one of them, a lawyer, came at Jesus with a question. ***“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”*** They probably expected Jesus to come up with some highfallutin and fancy answer. But He didn't, did He? His answer was direct and to the point. Even more it was simple. In fact, those who have studied the Scriptures might even call it obvious. But these Pharisees, in their desire to impress, to wax philosophical, to use the Word as a springboard instead of a mine, often missed the obvious. Those of us using the historic lectionary saw that in the Holy Gospel last week, when they were stumped regarding whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus' answer was simple, and here it is: ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”***

Love God above all and with all you are and love your neighbor as yourself. When we love God we will of necessity love our neighbor, whom God commands us to love. When we love our neighbor, we are also loving God, who commands us to love our neighbor. Pretty simple, right? Simple on the page, at least. In life, we can find it more difficult. To quote St. Paul, ***“I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.”*** Perhaps that's not your experience. Perhaps you think those Ten Commandments are a piece of cake, that you've gotten them down pat. I doubt that's the case, but if it is, I'll have John ring the bells and we can sing a Sanctus. But first, let's be sure that you're right.

Jesus is clear, isn't He? Love God and love your neighbor. And not only that, but love God with all you are, with your ***heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself***. The New Testament doesn't do away with the moral law. In fact, Jesus amplifies it, so to speak. He not only commands us not to commit adultery, but not to lust, and not only not to murder, but not to hate or become unrighteously angry. But that is the depth to which sin has penetrated our being. It's in our hearts and minds. As Luther notes, we can't keep the birds from flying in our hair, and we must struggle to keep them from building a nest.

As pastors we see the serious temporal consequences of the breaking of these commandments every day. What is counseling most often but confession and absolution by a different name, as we identify the sins that have devastated marriages, families, or personal lives, strive to make them understood, to find ways to fight and flee them in the future, and, most importantly, forgive them. But as we counsel others, St. Paul's words in Romans 2 (21-24) shouldn't be forgotten: ***"You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'"***

In the first lesson for the one year readings yesterday, God said to the Israelites, ***"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart."*** God didn't want appearances. As I read that, I wondered if God didn't want appearances, why did I worry about them so much as a pastor? God doesn't want me to manufacture a holy image among my people. God wants me to be holy in His Son. Those are two very different things. If I am overly concerned about what people see when they look at me I've forgotten my job is for them to see Jesus through me and not as me. There's a reason pulpits and altars are in many churches built so that they are hard to move but pastors have legs. Christ must be the center. ***"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn."*** Our image doesn't matter. It's the image of God, lost in the Fall, renewed in us through faith, that we matters and that we are to model, feebly at times, for our people, not some self-aggrandized or bigger than life version of ourselves.

A mind-boggling thing occurs every Communion Sunday at Christ Lutheran. My wife kneels and receives the Sacrament from my hand. Don't get me wrong, my hand is by far the least important aspect of the Communion process. But it always amazes me. She knows me. There's no image there. There's the real thing, and the real thing ain't always pretty. Yes, I'm her pastor, but I'm also her husband. She knows me. She knows my sins. She knows my weakness. She knows my proclivities. She knows those areas where I struggle in my Christian walk. As the one I love most on this planet, she is also the one I am capable of hurting most. Yet she comes up to the altar. The fact that I am standing there doesn't confound her faith to the point that she stays away. No, she comes to the altar, because Jesus is there, for her forgiveness, and yes, as she would be the first to remind me, for mine.

Isn't it amazing, though. You read the Bible and God uses sinner after sinner to announce God's grace. Abraham the liar. Jacob the deceiver. Moses the murderer. David the adulterer. Peter the denier. Paul the persecutor. If He was worried about image, He was definitely calling the wrong men. But the pattern has stood, hasn't it? He's called me. He's called you. What a confession of His grace, that He uses our hands, our mouths, our persons and gifts to give His gifts to His beloved people, for whom He died and rose.

One of the most compelling stories of the English Reformation is that of the martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer became the Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII and guided the English Reformation, putting together, for instance, the Book of Common Prayer.

After King Edward, a Protestant, died unexpectedly and young, however, Edward's sister, Mary, a committed Roman Catholic, came to the throne. Most know her as "Bloody Mary." Locked in the Tower, report after report delivered to him of the arrest and death of dear friends and coworkers, Cranmer eventually signed a recantation. Even worse, he went on to sign further recantations. Finally, on the day of his death, he was supposed to give a speech detailing his errors in the University Church. He went into the pulpit, prayed, and then gave a message quite different from the words he'd had previously approved. He said that his hand, for signing the recantations, would be first in the fire, and committed himself and his cause to the Lord Jesus, whose mercy alone saves. When he was burned, he kept his promise, and as the flames surrounded him, he held his hand first into the fire.

What in our lives should be first in the fire? What has prevented us from loving God above all and our neighbor as ourselves? In what ways have we stolen some of God's glory for ourselves? Have we used his name for personal advantage through a careless or self-serving exercising of the ministry of the Word? Have we loved our neighbor as ourselves and as we've counseled others? Have you spoken of your flock as a father his dear children, as a husband his beloved wife? ***"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched'"*** (Mark 9:43-48).

Notice what Jesus talks about right after giving us this simple but meaningful, obvious but deep summary of the commandments. He goes on to talk about who He is. That's important. The obvious may be obvious, but it is often overlooked. Here the Son of David to whom they should have been begging, ***"Hosanna,"*** "Lord, Save us," and they didn't notice. One of my favorite paintings is *The Procession to Calvary* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It's because it is a sermon on canvass. A mess of busyness and color grabs your attention when you look at it. It is a busy day in a busy city. Perhaps it is a commentary on the hectic pace of sixteenth century life? No, if you look closely, Christ bears the cross, almost lost in all that surrounds Him.

Jesus stands right before us, with words on a page, bread and wine placed in our mouths, simple in the most meaningful sense. Let's not lose sight of Him. Right after telling us what He commands, He reminds us who He is. He is the One who has conquered our enemies, crushing the serpents head as His own head was crowned with thorns, breaking the old evil foe's grip on us even as His own hands were nailed to the tree, a tree on which a death would bring the life lost when our first parents ate of the fruit of a tree. He is the One who has not abandoned us, but sits at the right hand of God, our cares and days resting in His pierced hands, as He governs all things for our good. That is your Lord. That is my Lord. And before you could ever love Him, or love your neighbor as yourself, in any semblance of a selfless way coming anywhere near the selfless love of our Christ, He loved you.

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10-11). What a marvel to be the objects of such love! What a joy to reflect it! What a blessing to walk in it! What a gift to administer it with our hands, to announce it with our lips. Amen.