

Sunday, October 29, 2017

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

Loving God, Others and Self

As we continue to learn what it means to serve God faithfully with hope and praise it is important to recognize that each person has accomplished and can accomplish something unique. In our reading from Deuteronomy, we heard how Moses could only get to see the Promised Land from the mountaintop. But he dies knowing that God's promise would be fulfilled as the next generation of the former Egyptian slaves would enter and live there. As a leader Moses has accomplished much—journeying for 40 years in the desert, facing conflicts within the people, battles outside the people and even the need for basic food and water and the knowledge that God did not leave them at any point. Moses died knowing that someone else would lead the people into the next phase of their history with God's help. And God did.

Throughout history there have been many people who have influenced and changed what God called his worshipping children based upon influences and outcomes of human interaction. Many of these stories are written in the Bible. But to understand how the church has changed and evolved through time and why there are many Christians worshipping God, Jesus and the Spirit, but doing so in different ways we need to take a moment to reflect on the church itself.

Jesus established the church with the disciples' purpose of carrying out his mission of teaching people about God's love and the forgiveness of sins with the promise of eternal life. This ministry was passed on to many faithful people and it is Paul and his colleagues who established many churches in the region outside what we call the Holy Land. These churches have come and gone with new ones established into neighbouring countries. These early churches were very different than what we share and do within these sacred walls and this is because the church was very much the church of leaders. That is until a young monk by the name of Martin Luther became involved. He served the church as a monk, priest, and lecturer at Wittenberg University in Germany. But as he studied and lectured he was confounded by what he perceived as contradictions within his own belief system and the activities of the established church of his day, the Roman Catholic Church. This led to the writing of his 95 Theses which he nailed to the church door on Oct 31, 1517. Five hundred years ago, Luther began the protestant movement of the church which eventually led to the different denominations of the Christian Church. And even through these 500 years, both the Roman Catholic and the protestant

churches have continued to change and evolve but keep at their foundational core, the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Luther's major work and legacy was that he was unable to find peace even though he spent lengthy and frequent acts of confession and penance. But when he read John 3:16, he became convinced that the key to salvation is God's grace alone- not earned by the works of human beings. God's grace needed to be heard and understood by everyone from Luther's perspective and this has occurred in these intervening years.

Luther's influence brought many challenges and changes to the church but one constant has been the teachings of Jesus Christ. For Luther, it was important that the people be able to read the Bible in their own language and so he translated it into German. This was foundational for us today because Luther's influence eventually has enabled us to be able to pick up a Bible and read it in our own language. This legacy continues through the International Bible Societies and Distribution ministries like the Gideons. But for Luther, the key understanding for his faith was to know of God's grace, given through Jesus and his teachings of love.

In Matthew 22 Jesus is still teaching in the synagogue even though he knows that the Pharisees, those leaders of the accepted faith in the culture of the time, are trying to manipulate his teachings as going against the recognized state's observances. These Pharisees pored over the ancient writings of Moses to look for every law in the book and they were very scrupulous about the observance of all the religious laws. They counted up all the commandments of Moses and found that there were 613 of them; 248 of these were positive, and 365 of them were negative (one for every day of the year, they said).

As Jesus is teaching the people, one of these Pharisees ask him, "Teacher—which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" They were trying to see which one Jesus would pick of the 613. But quickly 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 you neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Jesus quoted from the OT book of Deuteronomy 6 and also Leviticus 19:18 as he summarized the greatest commandments.

How could the Pharisees argue against Jesus' words about these commandments to love? These were experts in the Law and basically Jesus gave the message of the laws of God in a condensed easy to remember version—love God, others and self.

But these Pharisees didn't stop there but talked amongst themselves. So Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They replied, "The son of David." But Jesus responded by asking a further question about how could David speak by the Spirit and call him Lord if he is His son? They did not know what to say or what he meant so they stopped asking him questions. Jesus knew what he was talking about. The Pharisees were just not really sure who he was.

For a moment let us look at Jesus' greatest commandments. Meaningful religion to Jesus was expressed in a triangle of love: love for God, love for others, and love for self. In that triangle of love is found the secret of a fulfilling life on earth and a foretaste of the life to come. In it is found the key to understanding God's grace and the depth of Christ's love and how we are to live love with others.

Lewis L. Austin in This I Believe states "Our maker gave us two hands. One to hold onto him and one to reach out to his people. If our hands are full of struggling to get possessions, we can't hang onto God or to others very well. If, however, we hold onto God, who gave us our lives, then his love can flow through us and out to our neighbor."

Luther picked this up and so did our forebears who looked at what it means to truly live in the love triangle. Is it possible? Fredrick Buechner writes in The Magnificent Defeat, "The love for equals is a human thing--of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing--the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing--to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy--love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world."

Martin Luther recognized the need for the people to know God and to love God because of God's love for us given in Jesus Christ. Five hundred years later, the church still continues to listen for God's word to us and to do what it says. And we do by following Jesus' two

commandments of love: God, others and ourselves. Do we still believe this teaching of Christ? Yes- and it is possible to share in this love because God's love never ends. How are we to serve faithfully with hope and praise? Much like Luther did- by living and loving and listening to the Spirit of God to direct our lives. Luther's legacy is in the Reformation of the church as he knew it and as we gather today to worship God we do so singing praises to God with music, with love and with the knowledge that God is listening.

Let us continue to serve faithfully with hope and praise. Let us rejoice with hope because God has called you and you have responded in faith. Let us rejoice as we sing of our commitment to sharing God's love serving one another in Jesus' name. Amen.