

Reformation Sunday
Saint Mark P.C.
October 25, 2020

The late congressman from Baltimore Elijah Cummings said just a few years ago, "Children are our messengers to a future we will never see."

One of the reasons we look back in history is to see what our ancestors, or spiritual ancestors were trying to tell their spiritual descendants - trying to tell us.

When we mark the beginning of the Reformation, we remember that one date - October 31, 1517, on the eve of All Saints Day when a young monk named Martin Luther put his ideas about the church he loved on the door of the Collegiate church in Wittenburg, Germany.

He was committed to making things better for those who would follow in the centuries to come, but he certainly had no idea that his words would, as we say today, go viral.

He wasn't imagining a new church that day - just a church that was true to scripture. He wished for a renewal of the church he loved - to eliminate the corruption and the greed he was experiencing. But as it drew the ire of those in power it became apparent that a new church would be born, that many other reformers would be influenced through Europe, like John Calvin in France, then Geneva, John Knox in Scotland and many others to this day 503 years later.

Being Presbyterian and with my own grandfather having arrived here from Glasgow Scotland, I am always learning about the way the Reformation comes down directly to us here at Saint Mark in the year 2020 as Presbyterians, whether or not you happen to have Scottish heritage.

Presbyterians like to say that we are the Reformed church always reforming according to the word of God. And that was their gift to us, to put Christ back at the center of worship and praise - not just to transform religion, but to transform people. That was their number 1 priority.

So all these years later we sometimes ask ourselves, what is our number 1 priority? What are we committed to? There are many things calling for our attention these days to be sure.

And it's fair to say the world is a lot more complicated than it was in 1517 in Wittenburg.

We want to be committed to many things - to our health, to our work, our careers, to our families, to our church work, so many things call for our commitment. But what is the number 1 commitment of your life or mine?

IN Matthew's gospel, we read how the Pharisees were pressing Jesus on this topic. They simply asked him, "Teacher what is the number one thing we should concern ourselves with - what is the greatest commandment?"

Now they were not interested so much in the answer, but rather in looking for a gotcha question, so they could accuse him of blasphemy if he answers wrongly in their eyes.

Remember the Pharisees were the ones tasked with writing the laws associated with the 10 commandments, and trying to anticipate every detail of the law, in the Jewish writing of the Talmud. Some interpreters say there were around 613 of these laws, describing the smallest detail

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So it was a great question - all of these things, how do you rank them?

But of course Jesus answers brilliantly using part of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. He says, in the flowery language of the King James version:

Thou shalt love the lord thy God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind, and a second is like it - love your neighbor as yourself.

What Jesus is saying to us is to live a full life, a rewarding life, our best life, love God and love neighbor as yourself.

These are principles that the Reformers took to heart, and they changed the world.

This morning on this Reformation Sunday, just briefly I would like to lift up two people from that time who took these words of Jesus and transformed their community and our world.

When John Calvin and John Knox encountered these words, a new movement was born which would change the entire Western world over time.

Calvin first in Geneva Switzerland, after being inspired by Martin Luther's writing, and then when John Knox visited Geneva, he called it 'the most perfect school of Christ he had ever seen in his life.'

In the 1500s, John Knox would take these ideas back to Edinburgh Scotland and preach on them at St. Giles Kirk.

What was the transformation that happened?

For the first time, men and women in that city were moved to build schools and begin to teach reading. Orphanages were built and hospitals. Christians there became the salt of the earth and the light of the world, transforming all of society into a more caring and just environment.

This is the legacy that comes to us in the Reformed tradition.

But it was that focus on Jesus Christ in Scripture that was behind it.

Both Calvin and Knox would emphasize 2 Spiritual Principles.

Number 1

Make God and God alone the number one priority of your life.

The message they were trying to send to us is that careers and hobbies and family life is great. But those things may not speak to the deepest needs of our hearts. They would ask us to make God and God alone the number 1 priority of our lives.

That word Religion is an interesting word.

It has come to mean very particular things in our day. But I love to look at the root of that -the Latin for instance is relegare, which means to bind together, or connect. It is said our word Ligament comes from that root. But we think of religion more like the Pharisees - as a set of laws or confining rules to obey and even judge others by.

True religion is actually being bound together with God, through Jesus Christ through the Spirit of God. Calvin's main thesis in all of his extensive work is to be focused on the goal of what he called "a mystical union with the living Christ"

John Knox likewise in Scotland wanted to bring people into a connection with God through Christ, and to make that their priority in life.

But how to best go about accomplishing this was the question.

So to be sure, some of this zeal was misplaced, and there were some mistakes made in Knox' Edinburgh. These reformers were far from perfect.

Knox had convinced the local authorities that it was against the law to skip Sunday Services, and it was punishable by a fine, or public humiliation, or even jail time. Needless to say, church attendance was great back then!

But slowly John Knox began to lose popularity around town. He even outlawed playing of the bagpipes on Sunday.

Here's one thing I love-

If you were an Elder at St. Giles Kirk, your primary job on Sunday was to go from house to house finding out if someone was skipping church! And to have them punished.

The task was so overwhelming that the Kirk Session had to double the number of elders to keep up with their territories!

But you know what they learned of course - that faith cannot be coerced, but as Jesus said it has to come from the heart, the mind, the soul. It has to come from within if it has any true place in your life.

Can we ask ourselves, "what takes priority in our lives?" What really comes first?

I had a conversation with one of our younger members talking about how hard it is for families to sort out all of the demands with young children especially today - when things get back to normal is it going to be sports or Sunday school is it youth group or school activities. It is not easy, everyone wants the very best for our kids and their development. But it is a matter of priorities.

Not long after the first wave of Reformers, a group of protestants wrote an updated confession of faith, called the Westminster standards. Within this is a teaching that some of us remember learning in Sunday School.

"What is the chief end of humankind?" it asks

"The chief end of humankind is to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

Is our priority to have this kind of connection to God?

Number 2 make ourselves available to be an instrument of God's love to a world in need.

One quote from a teacher always stuck with me - "The only ability God asks from us is availability"

The reformers also wanted us to know that our lives can be a ministry of service. We are to be ambassadors for Christ, where we are, where we work, our neighbors near and far. We can make a difference in our communities.

We can see many people living out this simple answer that Jesus gave those many years ago - love your neighbor, with simple but profound acts of service. Many of those acts we will never see or know of, but yet they glorify God.

Three simple words. Love your neighbor.

You may have seen even in a very recent Presidential debate, this simple line was quoted - I believe it was about wearing masks. We do that because it is a simple act of love and care for our neighbors.

and thinking of being a neighbor, and since we talked about Scotland, just a brief piping story:

Donald McDonald of the Isle of Skye went off to study in an English university. His mother came to see him in his dorm after his first semester, concerned how he was getting along.

Donald said, "Mother the people here are a bit odd"
"What is that"? she asked
Well, they are terribly noisy - the guy on one side just bangs on the wall all night, and the one on the other just sits in his room and screams."
"Oh Donald, how do you put up with these noisy English people?"
"I do nothing - I just stay in my room and play my bagpipes"

Jesus calls us to be a neighbor - even to people who are not like us or who are from a different culture.

In Scotland,
John Knox called what he was forming there "a godly commonwealth", with required education, social programs, care for the poor. It came to encompass all of society.
It propelled Scotland a very small, somewhat poor country, to be a leader in literature, education, medicine and later, economics under the theories of Adam Smith, who also lived in Edinburgh.

John Calvin said that we listen for God's call in our lives whatever our career is, and our whole life becomes a living witness to Jesus Christ.
And Knox said something similar:

"I love to sound my master's trumpet. And he certainly did that. He was in his time an instrument for Jesus Christ and we can be as well.

Do we love to sound our Masters trumpet as Knox did?

Love the Lord your God with all your heart mind soul and strength and love your neighbor far and near as you love yourself.
May it be so, thanks be to God. Amen.