

## Sermon Text for October 25, 2020

Sunday, October 25

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Sermon Title: Jesus the Reformer

I want to begin this morning with a quote from one of my favorite Christian authors Henry Nouwen, and here is what it says.

*“We can trust that when we reach out with all our energy to the margins of our society we will discover that petty disagreements, fruitless debates, and paralyzing rivalries will recede and gradually vanish. The Church will always be renewed when our attention shifts from ourselves to those who need our care. The blessing of Jesus always comes to us through the poor.”*

The blessing of Jesus comes when we choose to love God and love people. When we choose to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In our text this morning Jesus speaks some of his most famous words. Words famous for their simplicity and their power. Words that in many ways form the foundation of the Christian life of faith. As we come to this passage of sacred scripture today and peer into the life and teachings of Jesus together, trusting, inviting, yearning for the Holy Spirit to show up and speak up let us do so in prayer.

Holy Spirit, Spirit of the living God. Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation come and create within us, form life out the jumbled chaotic waters of our minds and our lives, Breath of God breathe upon us. Open our ears to hear your voice. Like the prophet Samuel we declare “Here I am Lord, your servant is listening. Open our eyes to see you anew. Open our mouths that we might speak the words of your servant Isaiah who declared. Here I am Lord send me. Open our hearts that we might be filled with the fullness of life, the life abundant that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Lord God, hover over us this morning. Fill this place with your presence so that we might love you with all that we are and love our neighbor as ourselves. And all God’s people said. Amen.

There is an old saying that goes like this- the enemy of my enemy is my friend. This is precisely what we have going on in our story today. Two rival groups in power, the Pharisees and Sadducees, are united in their efforts against JC. There is a tag team competition going on here. The Pharisees and Sadducees come together to try and publicly discredit Jesus by asking him “trick” questions. The Sadducees went first and failed, then came the Pharisees, then back to the Sadducees, and finally back to the Pharisees where our text picks up this morning.

The Pharisees are saving their best for last. They bring out their best and brightest, their heavy hitter. They bring out a lawyer. A professional theologian. A scholar versed and schooled in the Old Testament laws. All 613 of them. The crowd watches and waits. Will the Big city, Harvard schooled lawyer take down the young upstart Rabbi from the small backwoods town of Nazareth?

On paper this shouldn’t be a fair fight. This Rocky against Drago. The Eagles with their backup Journeyman quarterback, Nick Foles against Tom Brady and the Patriots. This is the big time. The big stage in Jerusalem in the courts of the Temple of the One True God. What the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the crowd don’t know is that Jesus is in his Father’s house. He has home field advantage.

Our text this morning begs the question, “why are these powerful groups concerned with this 30-year-old unschooled peasant?” Because... Jesus is leading a movement, a reformation

rooted in love. He has traveled all across Israel speaking to whoever will listen about the transforming power of God's persistent, pursuing love. An inclusive love that welcomes one and all, inviting them into the loving embrace of the Father. A love that welcomes prodigals, Tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, Democrats, Republicans, the rich and the poor.

This love threatens to bring down the establishment, the carefully crafted and calculated system of rules and laws and structures that determine who is in and who is out. Laws which profited only a few, celebrated the wealthy and shamed the poor and the downtrodden and the foreigner.

It should come as no surprise that those with the most vested interest, the Pharisees and Sadducees, were going to fight and scrape to keep their privilege and position. We should not be surprised because we see the same thing in our world today. What a strange thing to see someone with power relinquish it of their own accord, and yet while the Pharisees and Sadducees fight to maintain power they have no clue that the man standing before them Jesus of Nazareth, is in fact the Son of God who relinquished his infinite power. And humbling himself he took on flesh so that those who were powerless and alienated from God might be restored.

Jesus had come to flip the world upside down, to rewrite the human story from damnation to salvation, and he did it with a reformation rooted in God's unquenchable love for all of humanity.

I hope you are beginning to get a sense that there is a great deal on the line here. Like with the presidential debates over the past few weeks, what is unfolding is more than public sparring. This is a battle. History is on the line. The crowds were watching with great anticipation as the 4<sup>th</sup> and final round of this heavyweight fight took place. The lawyer stepped up. Voices hushed, the crowd leaned in, everyone waiting to hear what question he would ask. What devious, trickery would flow from his tongue. How would he stump Jesus? Could he stump Jesus?

"Teacher" says the lawyer, speaking to Jesus. We can imagine him saying it through gritted teeth, disdain dripping from his lips. He looks at Jesus, ragged and ordinary. There are no fancy letters behind his name. Even the title "teacher" is too good for him. The lawyer looks and sees a farce, a menace, a young man leading an uneducated mob. The Lawyer refrains from further niceties and asks his question.

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

When the lawyer asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment or law, this is not as easy a question to answer as we may think. There were 613 commandments. One for every day of the year and one for every part of the body. Laws upon laws. Countless tomes of writing detailing these laws parsing them out. You could study a life-time studying them and not know everything.

The Lawyer stands gloating, whatever Jesus chooses he can use it against him. Contradict him, argue, prove that there is in fact a greater commandment. The Lawyer is ready to watch Jesus squirm.

Jesus doesn't miss a beat. It's as if he's been preparing for this moment his whole life. As if he's been waiting for someone to ask him this question. He meets the loathing gaze of the Lawyer with eyes brimming with love and speaks into the silence.

"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."

Love him with all that you are. With all that you have. From the moment your eyes open in the morning to the moment you draw your final breath. Love him with everything. With the entirety of your being. Love him with your mind and your body and your emotions. Love him from the top of your head to the tops of your toes. The word for love that Jesus uses is the word used to describe marital love, it's faithful love, it's love that perseveres through the ups and downs, the good and the bad, in sickness and in health, through the trials and tribulations of Covid-19, it's love that is committed for the long haul.

When Jesus gives this response he is quoting a well-known scripture passage called the Shema. A passage that every God-fearing Jew would have prayed from the time they were a child. Words long memorized and uttered thousands of times. These were well-known, well-worn words. The words of the Shema would have been ingrained into the hearts of his listeners. They were the kind of words that stuck until the end. They were soul words.

When Jesus responds, I can imagine the heads nodding in the crowd. They knew deep in their guts that this was a good answer. You couldn't argue with the Shema. With the commandment to love God. It had been drilled into them from the time they were little kids to love the Creator and sustainer of all that exists, but Jesus isn't done. He keeps speaking.

"The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Jesus combines these two ideas, Love God and love your neighbor, in a way that they can never be separated again. This is not an either or situation. This is a both and scenario. We are called to love God and love people. They are two sides of the same coin. To love those who bear the image of God, is to love God Himself.

In Matthew 25 just a few chapters later Jesus famously says, as you have done unto the least of these so have you done unto me. When you clothed the naked, fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger you did these things to God. The notion of loving God while turning a blind eye to the suffering of others is no longer an option. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus breaks down the old notions of who your neighbor should be, who is deserving of our time and energy and resources, who carries the Divine imprint. Jesus says everyone! You should even love your enemy.

Jesus is creating a revolution of love. He is cultivating a movement of love that reaches upward (love of God) love that reaches outward (love your neighbor) and inward loving yourself. He takes the 613 laws which only a few people could possibly keep. A bar so high that most could never get over it and gave up trying, and in the blink of an eye he re-writes, reforms the Law of God into 2 laws. Two practical laws that we can all live by. Love God and love your neighbor. Everything else hangs on these.

We don't often think about this, but Jesus found himself living and ministering in a country and a community that was deeply divided. There were people who wanted to cozy up with their Roman oppressors, there were others who were moving out in the desert to get away from the pagan Roman culture, there were others who wanted to just put their heads down and keep doing business as normal, there were others who wanted to overthrow Rome and were ready to go to war. Jesus grew up in a time ripe with disagreement and tension and anxiety. He lived in a time where competing ideas about how to move forward were constantly clashing. Where neighbors had been turned against neighbors, where racism was a real and present reality

In the midst of it all, the chaos the animosity, the fear, the frustration, the uncertainty, Jesus preached a message of Love. He invited people the love of and friendship of God, and to share that love with others, and Jesus extends the same invitation to each one of us.

We too find ourselves in a world filled with nitpickers and naysayers, conservatives and liberals, internet trolls and tyrants, people who are afraid of their neighbors because of the color of their skin and the sound of their accent. We live in a world not too different from the times of Jesus, which is why I believe with all my heart that we live in a world that is ripe for the re-forming, transforming work of God. A world that is looking for a movement of people who will love God with all that they are and will love their neighbors as themselves. A movement of people that will set aside their differences and be unified in love. A world that is looking for the Church to get back to its roots.

So, Church, the challenge has been set before us. The challenge to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The neighbors we like and the neighbors we don't like. The ones who agree with our political views and the ones who don't. The ones who are easy to love and the ones who annoy us. The ones who are rich and the ones who are poor.

Each one of us has been called to tangibly live out our faith through radical love. To put feet to faith, hands to hope and legs to love.

In this time of great division and fear and anxiety, let us come together and be united in these two things. Love of God and love of neighbor, for as we live in love we become the very hands and feet of Christ for a world that is desperately looking for Jesus. May they find him in each one of us in the week to come. Amen.