

Sunday of the Reformation, October 25, 2020

Matthew 22:37-38

LFLC

Okay, class. It is time for a Lutheran history lesson review.
I'll ask a question and give you 3 possible answers.

- (1) Martin Luther was not a black civil rights leader in the US during 1960s.
Instead, Martin Luther was born in what country and in what year?
Was it: A. Austria, 1501
B. Germany, 1483.
C. Norway, 1492
- (2) A major event occurred 503 years ago on the 31st of October, 1517,
in Wittenberg, Germany. What was that event?
A. Martin Luther gave out apples during Halloween that year.
B. Martin Luther passed his final exam to become a priest.
C. At the age of 34, Martin Luther posted the famous 95 theses,
questioning a controversial practice in the church,
- (3) By 1521, Luther had written "The Small Catechism."
When you were in Confirmation class, did you have to memorize ...
A. All of the Small Catechism.
B. Some of the Small Catechism.
C. None of the Small Catechism.
D. What is a Catechism?
E. What is Confirmation?
- (4) By 1530, the Lutherans were called before the Emperor to give an account
of their theology. The famous document they presented is called:
A. The Magna Carta
B. The Bill of Rights
C. The Augsburg Confession
- (5) Final question: The key article in that Augsburg Confession is. . . . ?
A. Number 4
B. Number 4
C. Number 4
("We are justified by grace through faith.")

Remember the story from Scriptures where a young man asks Jesus,
"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Well, that was basically Luther's question growing up
and during his early life as a monk.

He struggled with living in guilt, and tried valiantly to become acceptable to God,
and yet knew in his heart that he could never be worthy enough.

But in his study of the Book of Romans,
 Luther came across these words from today's 2nd Lesson:
 "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned
 and fall short of the glory of God."
 (So far, no good news, but hold on. . .)
 they are now justified by God's grace as a gift,
 through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

That stunning realization or epiphany was a turning point for Luther.
 A new world and a new life opened up for him--and his grasp of grace. . .
 or being grasped by grace. . .changed everything.

He suddenly realized that we cannot make ourselves worthy before God
 but rather live by grace because God declares us righteous;
 declares us justified—(which means
 "to be put into a right relationship with God")--
 therefore, our "justification". . .our "righteousness" is a gift from God.

"Justified by God's grace through faith."
 Those words have become, still are and always will be
 the central statement of Lutheran theology and identity.
 (The other two Lutheran catchphrases are:
 "There's a pot-luck lunch next Sunday"
 and "We've never done it that way before.")

So, to proclaim it once more: The central statement of Lutheran theology
 is that we are "Justified by God's grace through faith."
 And "faith" here is not intellectual assent to a certain idea or formula,
 but rather faith is "trust"—trust in God's gift of love and grace.

Now, although grace is the song that Lutherans sing in the ecumenical choir
 and we quote it, debate it, and enshrine it in church constitutions and bylaws,
 the truth is, as the Lutheran theologian Robert Kysar states,
 "The truth is that justification by grace is not just an idea or a doctrine.
 It is, instead, a way of life."

Kysar argues that this statement is such a radical concept
 that we do not easily accommodate it into our daily lives.
 As he puts it: "Most of us have been soaked for years
 in the fluids of accomplishment, work, and goodness.

Before we had a religious thought in our tiny brains,
 our parents were telling us that if we were good little girls or boys
 we would be rewarded, but if we were 'naughty,'
 there would be no dessert, no television, no screen time at all.

And he goes on to say that in the workplace, “the atmosphere is saturated by the accomplishment ethic. We accomplish things because we work hard, because we pull our weight. . .and shoulder our share of the load.

“Just imagine a boss who tells you that you cannot get promoted by working hard and accomplishing the company’s goals, but, instead, any and all promotions will be done by grace!”
Wouldn’t that set off a firestorm of protest?
In fact, that talk about grace is the kind of talk that got Jesus killed. . . and is the kind of talk that today’s Gospel reading sets before us.

“You shall love the Lord your God with **all** your heart, with **all** your soul, and with **all** your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
Sounds like a demand. . .a law. . .a command. . .an order, doesn’t it?
Nothing about grace, not even a hint at all, right?

Garrison Keillor is the name of the author of the book **Lake Wobegon Days**— a collection of stories about a mythical town somewhere in central Minnesota— a town that is virtually impossible to find on a map because it is located exactly on the crease where the map gets folded.

Lake Wobegon is populated mostly by Norwegian Lutherans and German Roman Catholics whose church is named “Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility”.
As well, in the town, there a few Plymouth Brethren fundamentalists thrown in for good measure.

Keillor’s follow-up book, entitled **Leaving Home** continues with stories from Lake Wobegon. . . and one of the stories centres around those whom the author calls “the exiles”— that is, young people who left Lake Wobegon to find work in the bigger cities, but who come back to celebrate special events like Homecoming, Thanksgiving, and, especially, Christmas.

And one of those unforgettable characters is a young man named Larry Sorenson. Keillor writes:

“At the Thanksgiving service, Larry the Sad Boy was there, who was saved 12 times in the Lutheran Church--an all-time record. Between 1953 and 1961, he threw himself weeping and contrite on God’s throne of grace on 12 separate occasions— and this in a Lutheran Church that wasn’t evangelical, had no altar call, no organist playing “Just As I Am Without One Plea” while a choir hummed and a guy with shiny hair took hold of your heartstrings and played you like a cheap guitar.

Remember, this is a Lutheran Church, and these are Scandinavians who repent in the same way that they sin: discreetly, tastefully, at the proper time, and they bring a Jello salad for afterward.

Larry Sorenson came forward weeping buckets and crumpled up at the communion rail, to the amazement of the minister, who had just delivered a dry sermon about stewardship, and who now had to put his arm around this limp soggy individual and pray with him and see if he had a ride home.

***Twelve times.** Even we conservative Lutherans got tired of Larry being saved. Granted, we're all born in original sin and are worthless and vile, but twelve conversions is just too many many. God didn't mean us to feel guilty all our lives. There comes a point when you should dry your tears and join the building committee; or start grappling with the problems of the church furnace and church roof and make church coffee and be of use, but Larry just kept on repenting and repenting.*

He came up again a few weeks later on Christmas Day and because he was drunk, he knocked over the Christmas tree and spent the next eight hours apologizing for it, and the penance we all had to pay for his sin was worse than the crime."

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, and with all your mind.
And you shall love your neighbour as yourself."

There are three emphases in these two verses that I want to touch on briefly today. . . and the first is to point out how often and how prominent that little word **all** is in the first verse.

And I think the reason Jesus stresses that small, three-letter word
is because he wants us to realize something
that Larry the Sad Boy never figured out—
which is that loving God isn't something that can be done
by people who merely want to tinker with their spiritual lives
until what they become is a little better or a little nicer
or a little kinder than they were before.

For Jesus, such a notion is folly. . . which is why he uses the tiny word **all**—
because it underscores his conviction that in order to love God properly,
that we need to undergo a completely restructuring of who we are—
not just a renovation but a re-creation;
not a minor repair job but a major death and resurrection job.

Because you see, as long as we are stuck on ourselves:
thinking only of ourselves, working only for ourselves,
trying hard to save ourselves—
that is, to put the best face on our actions
so that others. . . and God. . . will consider us such fine people;

as long as we are centred only on ourselves
and staring at our own belly-buttons all the time
as if we were and are the important beings in the universe--
we can never be centred on, stuck on or saved by God.

True, to love God fully and completely with **all** that we are and have means to repent—
but repentance isn't the same as fixing up our present thoughts and deeds
until they become a little more pious or holy than they were before,
thereby allowing us to continue on with our lives the same as before.

Instead, as it has been said before on countless occasions,
to repent means “to turn around”—
but not just turn our heads around so that we are looking back
over our shoulders at God
but rather to have our brains and hearts and lives and minds
turned upside down and inside out-- turned utterly around
so that we are once more facing and focused on the One
calling us to come back home.

“You shall love the Lord your God with **all** your heart,
with **all** your soul, and with **all** your mind.”

The second emphasis I want to touch on is that the word
Jesus speaks to us today is a **Living Word**—that is, is not a **dead word**
in the way that a scientific formula is dead
or a philosophical proposition is dead
or a logical argument is dead.

I mean, when we are confronted with a formula,
we may or may not agree with it;
we may or may not concede the truth of a proposition;
and we may or may not admit the validity of a logical argument.
To a “dead word” like those, a response of agreement or disagreement
isn't necessarily expected or demanded.
But to a **living word**, some sort of reaction—
whether agreement or not—is required.

For example, and I have used this illustration before
and chances are that, at my age, I might use again sometime:
In December of 1967, I asked Trudy to marry me.
Now, my proposal to her, however it was done—
and it was done on one knee in the snow in Michigan--
my proposal of marriage was a “living word”
because it expected an answer. . . a response.

And the reply that she would have to give
 would not be insignificant or meaningless or trivial either
 because her answer would. . .and did. . .
 change her life. . .and mine. . . completely and forever.

In the same way, when Jesus stands before us today,
 looks us right in the eye and says,
 “**You** shall love the Lord your God with **all** your heart,
 with **all** your soul, and with **all** your mind”
 he isn’t asking whether or not we agree
 with the notion of loving God
 or the concept of loving God or the idea of loving God.

He is calling us **love** God—that is, to cling to our relationship with God with all our might;
 to depend on God for all our needs; to trust God when it seems easier
 or more sensible to give up on God;
 to hold on to God when everything else around us is falling apart
 or scaring the daylights out of us.

Now, to do that—to love God like that—takes courage and strength
 which is exactly what we receive from Christ in this holy meal—
 a meal **in** which which he comes to us,
 a meal **by** which he works to strengthen us. . .and, even more,
 a meal **through** which he remakes and refashions us into his body.

To put it another way: In this meal, we become what we eat.
 We become the Body of Christ—become the eyes and ears
 and hands and feet of Christ in this world.

And we are strengthened, recreated, remade, refashioned to do
 the very thing the next verse says: “To love our neighbour as ourselves.”

Now, to love ourselves is not a call to narcissism or self-fulfillment,
 or self-aggrandizement or even self-preservation.
 Rather, his words “as we love to ourselves” are meant to remind us,
 once more and once again as Heidi said last week in her sermon,
 that we are created in the image and likeness of God—
 which means we are seen by God as righteous. . .as lovable. . .
 as worth loving. . .worth caring about. . .worth dying for.

And since. . .or because. . .we are loved and lovable,
 we are therefore able to be loving. . .able to love our neighbours.
 Indeed, loving our neighbour is how we demonstrate or make plain
 the truth that we are loved by God and that we love God in return.

And we show our love for God with all that we are
 by loving our neighbours as ourselves—that is,
 by seeing our neighbour, not as THE OTHER. . .
 as ONE OF THEM. . .but as one of us. . .as one with us. . .
 as one connected to us. . .as a part of us. . .
 as one joined to us in one body by the love and grace of God in Christ.

So, we are loved by grace. We are saved by grace. We live by grace. We love by grace.

But, as Kysar put it: We have a hard time grasping this concept of grace
 and learning to live a grace-filled life takes time and perseverance.
 For that reason, we are never done preaching and teaching it;
 we are never done needing to hear it over and over again;
 we are never done needing the reminder
 of who we are and whose we are—
 that we are the beloved and precious children of God.

On this 503th anniversary of the Reformation, the Lutheran World Federation
 is asking us to share our celebration and our unity,
 not just with Lutherans around the world,
 but also with our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic church. . .
 and with other Protestant churches including Presbyterians and Anglicans.

Now, please note: “Unity” is not the same as “uniformity”.
 “Uniformity” implies that everybody thinks, believes and acts the same,
 whereas “Unity” means that we are all of one mind. . .
 of the same mind that was in Christ Jesus—
 who, out of love for us and for all, gave himself for us and for all—
 even for Larry for the Sad Boy.

Let me close with a story told by Bishop Greg Mohr—
 a story not dissimilar from one I mentioned earlier.
 It was told at a synod gathering by an elderly member
 of Mt. Zion Lutheran Church in New Westminster
 which has deep Norwegian roots.

Talking about her many years of participation in that congregation,
 she highlighted one incident, in particular, that took place
 when she was in confirmation—about 12 years old.

The class of confirmands was required to attend the Annual General Meeting
 during which it was reported how many people were members of the church.
 And while I cannot remember the precise number she quoted that day,
 I think you will still get the point of this story.

She said that the pastor’s report listed the membership as: 45 souls and 3 Swedes.

Now, I don't know whether the Swedes felt graced. . .or not.
But we are. . .graced. . .graced indeed. . .
graced to be loved by God; graced to love God;
and graced to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Amen. SDG