

Celebrating Reformation
October 29, 2017

Text: Matthew 22:34-29

Theme: “A Teachable Moment”

As you can see I have an assortment of items here today. First of all I have this Zirbel family produced piece of art, a custom made Luther’s Rose for the occasion of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Each petal has 100 sticks, each one individually dipped in blue paint to represent each year—easy math, $100 \times 5 = 500$. Around the heart you will see these red topped toothpicks. There are 95 of them corresponding to the 95 Theses. Remember these theses raised questions about the sell of indulgences, a practice, particularly the way it was being hawked by Johann Tetzel, that pricked the heart of Luther.

And then we have these: these boards, this piece of aluminum, and some nuts and bolts. What do these have to do with anything? Hopefully they are part of a teachable moment. Teachers love such moments, that time maybe scheduled or maybe not, when a subject arises or question that is asked that leads right into an expanding of knowledge. Now, not all questions are asked with an intent toward learning. Some are asked to distract or delay or maybe to stir things up. Some Pharisees come to Jesus today with a question with just such an intent. We read they asked a question to “test” him (vs 35). It was test they hoped he would fail, make him look silly. The Master teacher takes their ill hearted question and uses it for a teachable moment. His teaching that day continues to instruct us on this day.

Among the Pharisees were many teachers. They knew the law and the prophets well enough, very well, and guided by the tradition of the fathers they supposed they were following them very well. They saw Jesus as a problem. He had little respect for their

respectability. He needed to be put in his place, a low place, dead if necessary. They thought they knew about the greatness of any commandment very well, had not really asked the question to be taught.

We can be like that, think we have it all figured out, know enough already. Why do we need to know more about math, or science, or history? This learning stuff can get in the way of what I really want to do like hang out with friends or exercise my thumbs. Often folks think they know all they need, or want to know about God, or faith, or Christianity, or about a moral walk through life.

No, they did not come to really learn, but Jesus will teach. There were a lot of commandments. We think of the Ten. But let's do a little addition. I take these 500 sticks and 95 toothpicks, that makes 595. I add these two boards, these two upright supports, and this one aluminum angle, 5, and that gets us to 600. Now I add in 3 bolts and 4 nuts, 7, and we have 607. Finally I add in the 5 rose petals and 1 heart, 6, and we have 613. Why didn't you add in these other two short boards? Because I wanted my total to be 613, not 615. What's so special about 613? It's a fine number, even a prime number (I think). It was the number of commandments enumerated by the Jews. I'm not sure this was the number at the time of Jesus. It was written down in the Mishnah a couple of hundred years after His time on earth.

Jesus answers their question and answers directly. This was unlike His answer when asked about paying taxes to Caesar. He said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your hearts and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great (mega) and first commandment." (vs 37, 38) And then He gives them more. "And the second is like you it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (vs 39) And yet still more, "On these two commandments depend ("hang," *kremannumi*) the Law and the Prophets." The Law

and the Prophets would be all the OT Scriptures. He was saying definitive instruction in the Law and the Prophets centers in these two—love God and love your neighbor.

Simple, right, not 613, not 10 to keep track of, just two. But it's oh so hard, even impossible. If we tell God how much we love Him, tell Him how great He is, and then treat our neighbor like dirt then we are not only not loving our neighbor we are not loving God. The two are interconnected. If we do some nice things for our neighbor, but have the attitude that God doesn't really matter, never in the equation, then motivation for doing "good" is coming from the wrong source. That which is pleasing to God is keeping it all straight—perfectly straight.

Over 500 years ago, from early on, Martin Luther, born in 1483, learned how hard it was. No matter how hard he tried to keep things straight, he kept coming up short. He became a monk, lived a life of self-denial, exceeded what was expected of him, and yet that did not bring him peace. He would confess his sins, maybe 613 of them, but 10 minutes later he would remember one more and that would ruin his whole day. He believed there would be hell like pains in purgatory to pay for it, though some thought there was a prepayment plan available in indulgences. It was impossible to keep it all straight, to live righteously before the totally righteous God. At times Luther was angry at God in face of these impossibilities.

But then there was a change. In our Gospel lesson from John 8 we read, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31) Luther began his time of serious abiding. He had known the accusations of the law for a long time, not keeping 613 or 10, or 2, or even 1. But he entered into a new abiding in the sweetness of the Gospel. He was given the position of teaching the Bible, and to teach you must know. So for the first time he began to study

the Bible directly. He was feeding on God's Word learning a whole new truth, new to him, but a truth that always was, of the righteousness of God. He learned the righteousness of God was not only that which God had as part of His being, it was gift to him, Martin Luther, in Jesus. So he would write of *Jesus Christ, my Lord, who redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me, from sin, from death, and the from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood, and His innocent sufferings and death.* Jesus had lived the perfectly righteous life for Him, had died for Him to atone for his crookedness, been raised for him, was ruling for him, and was returning for him, Martin! It was free. He was free! The Son had set him free. That was the truth. He was free indeed!

This was a confidence and hope Luther wanted others to share in. His heart was pricked when some of his parishioners come back from the neighboring town showing him the indulgence certificates they had purchased from Johann Tetzel. It was hawked that such a certificate would mean time out of purgatory for a loved one already there, or for you. The treasury of merit was supposed to be filled by those who did more than was required before their deaths and was at the disposal of the Pope to dispense as he saw fit. Luther was quite upset that people were being preyed on in this way. He questioned the whole practice. He wanted a theological discussion of the matter, thus the posting of the 95 Theses, proposals to be discussed, one of which, #62, declared the true treasure of the church was the Gospel. The truth had set Luther free and he wanted more to know and live in this freedom.

The Truth is still true. Sin is still sin. The commandments are still summed up in the two, love God and love neighbor. The Ten Commandments show us what that loving looks like. They have not changed. We don't keep it straight. We fall short, deserve judgement, wrath, damnation. That's the hard truth. But the Son sets us free for He has

faced the judgment and condemnation for us. The Son, has faced it already, once for all for us all. *For God so loved the world...there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (John 3:16, Romans 8:1).

We have been set free from this fear, God's promise. We have been freed to love God and love our neighbor. Think of Luther before he knew and believed the truth. His joining the monastery, his depriving himself of adequate food, sleep, and clothing, his hours of prayer, hours of confessing—all these things were being done primarily for Martin Luther. He was doing this in hopes of being good enough. It's quite selfish when you think about it. And it is the same for you and me if not flowing from our Christ connection, being good to gain good. It's about me.

But in Christ, in the Son, we are freed. We, believers in Christ, are new creations, God's workmanship. Luther would say God doesn't need our good works, our neighbor does. God brings good to our neighbor through us. God brings good to us through our neighbor. This includes physical needs. It includes more as we have opportunity to share the news of the greatest need met, forgiveness. As we give ourselves to meeting the needs of our neighbor God is exalted. As we come to God in thanksgiving and prayer, our neighbor is exalted in our eyes. As God strengthens us as we gather to receive from Him, we are able to love all the more.

We are here and Jesus is in our midst. It is a teachable moment. He continues to teach. We hear God's word about sin and about grace, the law and the Gospel. We were lost and condemned, but we have been redeemed and freed. It's from the Master Teacher. He we have joy, comfort, and peace. For Jesus' sake. Amen