

Pentecost 21, A – Reformation (October 25, 2020)
SCRIPTURES – Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; 1 Thess. 2:1-13; Matt. 22:34-46

“What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” (Matt. 22)

So, today – Reformation Sunday in the Lutheran Church – is, it seems, a day to set aside current issues and troubles and worries and get away for an hour... a day to reminisce. So, we sing old hymns that Martin Luther and his colleagues wrote in the 1500's and follow a worship Service that is based on one that Luther wrote. It's nice to take a break from the real issues that confront us, even if it's only for an hour!

Except, that's not what we're doing. The issue that confronted Martin Luther and those who followed his teaching was the same issue that Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees, confronted Him with. It still confronts us today. The issue is: how do you read and understand the Bible, and so understand God... how He relates to you and what He expects of you?

Matthew tells us that one of the Pharisees, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test Him. He wasn't testing how well He knew the Bible. For three years Jesus had taught it and applied its teachings to various issues. His opponents knew that He knew the Bible's words. How did He interpret and understand them, and so understand God? There they differed greatly from Him.

It was much the same for Martin Luther. His struggle with Church leaders began with the selling of indulgences – pieces of paper promising the immediate canceling of all punishments for sin for the person whose name was put on the indulgence. When parishioners began showing him the indulgence papers they had purchased, he was troubled. Surely God's forgiveness could not be so easily gained! And so, he wrote 95 Theses (statements) about indulgences and called for a debate with Church leaders about them. He posted those Theses on October 31, 1517... and started a struggle with theologians and bishops – including, finally, the Pope – that he never envisioned. It became a struggle over the Bible itself: its centrality, and how it is to be read and understood. After three years of discussions about his writings and appearances before Church leaders the Pope charged Luther with false doctrine and gave him 60 days to take back what he had written or face excommunication. In his response to the Pope's charges against him, Luther wrote (from Luther's Works, vol. 32):

They say that I propose new ideas... I preach nothing new, but I say that all Christian things have perished among the very people who ought to have preserved them, namely, the bishops and the scholars...

...what would their answer be, or how should we present our case, if a [Muslim] were to ask us to give reasons for our faith? He doesn't care how long we have believed a certain way or how many eminent people there are who have believed this or that. We would have to be silent about all these things and direct him to the holy Scriptures as the basis for our faith...

...[After he rose] Christ allowed his hands, his feet, his sides to be touched so that the disciples might be sure that it was he, himself (John 20:27). Why, then,

should we not touch and examine the Scriptures – which are in truth the spiritual body of Christ – to make sure whether we believe in them or not? For all other writings are treacherous... (pp. 10-12)

The Bible is “the spiritual body of Christ,” and it alone is the source of what we know and believe about God – this is what Luther had come to believe. And it is yours to hear and learn, that you might believe in God! For centuries Church leaders had taught that only the Pope, who was Christ’s representative on earth, and the Cardinals and Bishops could rightly interpret and understand the Bible. The people were to listen to them and not consider the Bible’s words themselves. But, the more Luther read and studied the Bible the more he came to disagree with this. He wrote:

This is my answer to those who accuse me of rejecting all the holy teachers of the church. I do not reject them. But everyone knows that at times they have erred, as men will; therefore, I am ready to trust them only when they give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred... Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for?... (p. 12)

...people toss the Word of God around as gamblers throw their dice... like impersonators who put on a new nose and change their whole appearance, they take from the Scripture its single, simple, and stable meaning [and] blind our eyes, so that we stagger about and retain no reliable interpretation... (p. 26)

And, what is the Scripture’s single, simple, and stable meaning?

...this is the abundant grace of the New Testament and the surpassing mercy of the Heavenly Father that... he has given us a bishop, namely Christ, who is without sin and who is to be our representative until we too become entirely pure like him [Rom. 8:34]. Meanwhile, the righteousness of Christ must be our cover. His perfect godliness must be our shield and defense. For his sake, the sin that remains in those who believe in him may not be charged against them... (p. 28)

And, why not? Because, as Rom. 8:34 says, “**Christ Jesus is the one who died**” – the One who was punished for our sins. We don’t have to pay for them or make up for them! “**More than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.**” Luther taught that you must, finally, see Jesus and Him alone as the focus and fulfillment of the Scriptures, and so rest your faith in, and your hope on, Him.

Jesus Himself teaches this, as we see in His question to the Pharisees. They, like He, knew God’s great commandment: “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**” God puts it this way in Leviticus 19: “**You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.**” God expects you to be, and so act, like Him!

And we fail miserably. Shoot, we struggle just to be good husbands and wives... good parents... good children... good neighbors and friends. To be like God? To always do what is good and true and right... and to think about and desire only what is good and true and right? Like God, to seek for others what will be good for them, even if it is

detrimental to yourself? This is what holiness is, by the way. It is not simply an inner and personal goodness. It is the outward expression of good, toward and for others. This is why Jesus added in His answer to the Pharisee the second great commandment. Loving God with your whole heart also means loving and serving others, for God loves and serves all people. And yet, look at what those Pharisees did: when questioned and challenged by Jesus, they withdrew from Him! And we do the same. Withdrawing from, and even wishing bad for, those who challenge you, trouble you, and make you uneasy is easy. It is also unholy, for it is ungodly. And it is what we often do.

God draws near and gives, even to those who hate Him. We see this above all in Jesus, His Son. Jesus wanted His opponents, the Pharisees, to see this, and this is why He asked them, **“What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?”** God doesn’t draw near only to make demands that we have no hope of meeting. He who demands holiness of us comes to give holiness to us. **“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,”** God says. *“I am your God. I have given and bound myself to you that you might give yourself to me and to others.”* It is above all in Jesus that we see this. He – the Christ, the Messiah – is a man, a descendant of David. This the Pharisees knew. But, he is also David’s Lord: above and before and greater than David. He is at God’s right hand, and God acts through Him. He is one with man *and* one with God; the true God *for* man. This is what Jesus wanted the Pharisees to see... what He wants us all to see, and believe.

Jesus: true God and true man, with and for us: He is the focus of all of Scripture. He is *“our bishop,”* Luther says; *“our representative, until we become entirely pure like him. [His] righteousness must be our cover. His perfect godliness must be our shield and defense. For his sake, the sin that remains in [us] who believe in him is not charged against us.”* And, He cannot be, and does not need to be, bought, for He gives Himself freely to you in His Scriptures. Hear them, learn them... and receive Jesus! And He, your Bishop, will speak for you always. The apostle John assures us: **“We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”** (1 John 2:1-2) Praise be the Father for sending Him for us, and for the Scriptures which bring Him to us! Amen.