Pentecost 23, B (Reformation) – October 31, 2021

Scriptures – Deut. 6:1-9; Hebrews 9:11-22; Mark 12:28-37

*One of the scribes asked, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”* Mark 12

Later today you might see ghouls and ghosts and other scary figures walking around. It’s Halloween! This holiday may date back thousands of years to a Celtic festival that marked the close of the harvest season and the coming of winter. The Celts believed that at that time the veil between the worlds of the living and of the dead was thinnest, allowing the dead to return and walk among the living. And so, people would light bonfires and wear costumes to ward off ghosts. In the 8th century Pope Gregory III, perhaps to change this fearful focus, made Nov. 1 All Saints Day: a day to focus upon the saints in eternal bliss in heaven. Nearly 800 years after that, a simple monk went out on the eve of All Saints and posted 95 Theses on the door of his church, hoping to initiate a discussion that would again change the people’s focus; for they had slipped back into fear. Boy, did he! People around the world now remember Martin Luther’s posting of his 95 Theses and celebrate October 31 as the Feast of the Reformation.

So: today is to be a day of joy and not fear, right? Well... ***“Hear, O Israel,”*** Moses thunders in our OT reading this day, ***“Fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments.”*** And Jesus affirms Moses’ words, calling them God’s great commandments. When a scribe praises His summation of them and says, ***“to love [God] with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices”*** – such loving obedience of God is worship; the greatest act of worship – Jesus says to him, ***“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”*** You’re close, scribe… but *you’re not there yet!* You are still *outside* of God’s kingdom… *outside* of His goodness, His mercy, His eternal life and every other blessing!! Now, that’s frightening. What about me? What about you?

You must fear God. You must because He’s God: the great and eternal Being upon whom your very existence depends; the One before whom you will one day stand to hear His judgment upon how you lived the life He gave you. You must have such great respect for Him and awe of His wisdom and understanding and goodness that you consider His will, as expressed in His command to ***“love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”*** and ***“love your neighbor as yourself”*** as one good command; a command to love. To love God is to follow Him by loving and holding to His Holy Scriptures, and then willingly going wherever He leads. ***“I will speak of your testimonies before kings, [O Lord], and shall not be put to shame.”*** (Ps. 119:46) Martin Luther had no clue when he posted his 95 Theses that he would end up standing before his king and entrusting his life to Christ alone by refusing to take back what he had written, and so facing excommunication and death. His followers had little idea of this, also. But, many princes and city mayors who followed Luther’s teaching also ended up standing before the same king and saying, *“We will allow you to cut off our heads before we deny this faith.”* Our God is to be loved above everything else and followed to the utmost.

This is so for you, also. Your obedience must reflect this; be completely out of love for God, and not simply because He’s greater than you. After all, grudging obedience is no obedience. We all know this. When a child groans and says, *“Do I have to?”* mom and dad aren’t happy. Such obedience is no obedience. Only freely and gladly given love truly pleases; pleases both us and God.

If you understand this and agree with this… ***“You are not far from the kingdom of God,”*** Jesus says. Not far… but *not there yet!* How stern and demanding is God… expecting far more than we can give! We sinners cannot offer loving obedience ***“with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul and with all [our] mind and with all [our] strength.”*** Only God, who is love, can so love!

And He does. How He loves us sinners! We hear it so often. Don’t let it fall on ears and hearts that have been dulled and hardened by the deceptive ideas about love, and loving obedience, that fill our world… and even corrupt God’s teaching.

When you know what led to Martin Luther writing and posting his 95 Theses – the Church was selling people documents that promised the immediate setting aside of all punishments for sins. *“When you buy this,”* they were told, *“and put a person’s name on it, that person immediately goes to heaven!”* – you might wonder, *“How could Christian people ever believe such hogwash?”* Well, they didn’t know what the Bible said. No one had or read the Bible… and when they heard it read in church it was in Latin, a language few knew. They didn’t know what God said and so trusted what their priests told them. Thanks be to God that this isn’t so for us! Every one of you owns at least one Bible, if not more. Do you read it? Do you learn it and take it to heart? Too few do today… and so, like the people in Luther’s day, they are easily misled. People’s ideas about God are shaped more by our entertainment media than by the Bible!

Now, by no means does this mean that all entertainment media is bad. Luther very effectively used the media of his day – the printing press – to spread Biblical teaching, and this can happen today, also.

* For instance, the 2008 movie *Gran Torino* very graphically and movingly portrayed a Christ-like sacrifice. Clint Eastwood’s character, Walt, saves his young neighbor, Thao, and his family by dying a bloody death at the hands of the gang that was terrorizing them. As bullets tear into his body Walt falls to the ground, his arms splayed to the side, bringing to mind Jesus on the cross.

This could be an introduction to considering Christ’s sacrifice – which was far greater. For, Walt was an old man who lived a lonely life with only his dog at home; his wife had died recently. He also realized that he had cancer, and faced a terrible future because of it. His sacrifice for Thao and his family spared Walt much pain.

Look upon Jesus. God’s demanding words about the obedience He expects – an obedience that demands our entire being and is prompted by love – seem utterly unfair. Such obedience utterly unattainable!… until you look upon Jesus. He had such love for His neighbor – you – and for God that He accepted His Father’s will that He offer Himself up as a sacrifice for you, and for all people. Love, even for the evil people who killed Him, led Him to offer Himself up. He who was at the right hand of God, and so who *is* the kingdom of God, went far to save us who are far from the kingdom of God. He came to join us in our flesh… and in our sin as He took it upon Himself on the cross. And, this wasn’t a willing sacrifice to satisfy an angry, grudging Father. Our reading from Hebrews says, ***“Christ, through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God.”*** (Heb. 9) The Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was present and showing utter love for you at Jesus’ crucifixion:

* There was the Son of God, Jesus, bearing our sins to save us from being punished for them.
* There was the Holy Spirit, offering up to the Father this sacrifice as the payment for all sins.
* There was God the Father, who sent His Son for this very purpose, now receiving His payment and canceling our debt of sin.

We do not need to live in fear and hopelessness. If you are in Christ – sprinkled by His blood in baptism, purified and made alive in Him by faith – then you are alive! You are pure! ***“Christ [purifies] our conscience from dead works to serve the living God,”*** says Heb. 9. He purifies our imperfect love by uniting it with His love. He purifies our imperfect obedience by uniting it with His perfect obedience. United as one in Him, you are made one with God. He is your eternal Father, and you are His eternal child.

Oh, we have so much to celebrate… so much life to live. The veil of sin separating us from God has been torn apart! In Christ we are truly alive, truly loved, and truly able to love… even while we struggle to do so. Even so, our sin is forgiven, and ***“Christ [purifies] our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”*** Salvation unto us has come! Each Christian therefore may be glad and build on this foundation! In the blessed name of Jesus. Amen!