



Reformation Sunday-October 25, 2020

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Matthew 22:34-46

“What Do You Think of the Messiah?”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Dear friends in Christ, Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It seems like Jesus has been going through a Rite of Confirmation of sorts of his own in our recent gospel readings. Jesus has been asked questions by different groups of religious leaders just like I have been asking questions each of these students being confirmed today. The first question Jesus was asked to pass his confirmation exam was by the Pharisees and Herodians. They asked Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor”. Jesus did not give the answer they wanted. Next, the Saducees, (who didn’t believe in the resurrection) asked Jesus about who will be married to who in the resurrection. Once again, Jesus failed to give the answer that these religious leaders were looking for. And today, Jesus gets one more chance to be confirmed when he is asked this question by a lawyer. “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” You students might think Jesus got off pretty easy with having to answer only 3 questions compared to the 75 questions I asked each of you. But each of you have done far better giving answers to me compared to the answers these leaders wanted. However, the questions that Jesus was asked were intended to trap him. Those asking the questions had hoped that Jesus would give the wrong answer because Jesus was teaching something new and they didn’t like it. They wanted a reason to reject his teaching, not to confirm it. This new teaching is summarized in the question Jesus asked them today, “What do you think about the Messiah?” This is the question that silenced those that had asked Jesus questions. But this is the question that each one of you will respond to today as you make public profession of your faith.

Quite often, Jesus ignores the questions that he gets asked knowing that however he answers he will get trapped. But that is not the case today. When Jesus is asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” This question is also asked with the intent of trapping Jesus, but Jesus does not avoid the question, he answers it perfectly. The deceptive lawyer however feels that he has devised a great trick question that will finally trap Jesus. The lawyer has been taught and believes that no commandment is greater than any other commandment. So, if Jesus picks one commandment over the others, he has been trapped. Jesus however does pick one commandment above the others. Jesus takes the first table of the commandments that deal with loving God and combines them all into one when he says, “You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And before the lawyer can get a word in edgewise, Jesus says a second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Here Jesus sums up the second table given to Moses dealing with your relationships with your neighbors.

The confirmation students have all answered this question, but they were asked this very question in this way, "What is the first word that God uses when he speaks to you?" And they have learned the same answer that Jesus gave the lawyer. God speaks to you and me first with a word of law. Each year, the confirmation students begin studying the commandments. They have learned that if they could keep the first commandment of loving God with all their heart, soul, and mind, they would be able to keep all of the commandments. If you would have no other gods, you would love your neighbor. But we quickly learn that we do not love the Lord with ALL our heart, soul, and mind. We have other gods like friends, jobs, time, leisure activities, family, money, sleep, hobbies and we learn that everything else can become a god over our God who we are to love above all things.

This first word of God, the law, can leave us despair if we believe that it is through the law or the commandments that we are saved. And as each commandment is studied, it is clear that we do not love God with ALL our heart, soul and mind, nor do we love our neighbor as ourselves. It troubles me that this is the point of teaching in our current confirmation class. What if the pandemic increases to the point again that we decide we should discontinue in person classes for the safety of our students? What if I leave the students with God's first word of law? What if I were to end my sermon now with this word that only accuses and leaves people in despair.

I would have to do as Jesus did after he answered the lawyer the question about the greatest commandment. I would give these students the second word, the final word, that Jesus gave to those listening to him that day. I would send God's second word, the gospel, the good news, by mail or by ZOOM or by google classroom, or maybe through Facebook Livestream as you may be listening today. God speaks in two words and we cannot have the law be the first and final word that you hear.

Jesus delivered the gospel with this question. "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son, is he?" This is the saddest part of the reading for today is that they do not know the answer. They are hearing the gospel for the first time and they don't believe in this second word. They have been taught and convinced that they are saved by how well they love God and how well they love their neighbors. They believe the love they have for others will be their ticket for heaven. Their only response is that the messiah is the son of David.

This answer is only partly correct. Jesus is in fact described many times in scripture as the son of David. This is evidence that Jesus is truly human. But if Jesus is only a human, Jesus becomes only an example of the morals we should follow. Following Jesus and our eternal destiny is then in our hands as we look to Jesus as only a good teacher and example of the law.

However Jesus confounds everyone that day when he quotes Psalm 110 and asks them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'" If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" They do not believe that Jesus is a messiah who is God himself. They do not believe that it is Jesus who saves by his word alone.

On this Reformation Sunday, we remember Martin Luther who was a preacher who clearly preached the same message that Jesus preached that day. On this Reformation Sunday you have heard the preaching of Paul from

Romans who declared that through the law only comes the knowledge of sin. And it is apart from the law, it is through faith in Jesus Christ, the messiah that you are saved.

Today we have a group of students who Jesus has chosen. They were first chosen in their baptism when he claimed them as his own. On that day, each parent and sponsor promised that these students would learn more about this God who has chosen them. In Confirmation classes these past two years, they have learned more about God's laws and promises and today they make public this profession of this faith they have in the Triune God. It has been my pleasure to teach these children the story of Jesus and the love he has for them. To teach them that it is not their love for God or their love for their neighbor that saves them, but it is because God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

The 76th question I asked of each of these students is, "What is the most important thing you have learned in Confirmation?" This was my way of asking the question that Jesus asked "What do you think of the Messiah?" None of these students were silent like the religious leaders were that day. Instead, each student has replied "I am not saved by my good works, I am saved by faith in Jesus Christ who has chosen me."

This is their sermon for you today. This is indeed an old, old story. It was told by Jesus. It was told by Paul. It was told by Martin Luther. And today, you have heard once again the sweetness of this old, old story of Jesus and his love. Amen.