

## The Reforming Power of Love

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October 25, 2020 Matthew 22:34-46

If you are watching this on or around October 25, you might be mindful that it is Reformation Sunday, the Sunday nearest October 31, commemorating the German priest Martin Luther nailing his “95 Theses” to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517, thus launching the movement called the Protestant Reformation, of which we Presbyterians are a part. And you know that in just a bit more than a week, a consequential presidential election will be held that is generating no small amount of cultural response. The confluence of those two circumstances, Reformation and election, feels like a continuation of last Sunday’s conversation about the relationship between faith and politics, church and state, “Christ and culture,” as H. Richard Niebuhr called it.

Which led me to think of a story. When I was a kid, our family lived in a small town in southeastern Ohio, whose schools were under-funded. Something needed to be done. A bond levy campaign was held, to increase taxes to support education. My dad, somehow, was recruited to lead the campaign. He got flak for it. What’s a minister doing involving himself in that, some wondered, and not only that, but something that was quite divisive in the community. I don’t remember much about it, but I do remember attending a big rally in the high school auditorium the night before the election, when elections were still held on one day. The bond levy lost. My dad was devastated. The schools continued to struggle.

If one can be proud of a parent when you are in third or fourth grade, I was proud of my dad for leading that effort, and grateful that he did. It was not an *exclusively* Protestant, or Reformed, or Presbyterian thing to do. But it was all of those things, a strong example of Niebuhr’s “Christ transforming culture” dynamic and a thing to embrace in this election season and on this Reformation Sunday.

I never fully talked to me dad about all of this, and I wish I had. I wish I had asked him about his responses to the people who criticized him for his leadership, and what risks he took by saying “yes.” Absent that conversation, here is how he might have responded...

- I am involving myself because my faith demands it.
- I am involving myself because Jesus loved the little children and told us to do the same.
- I am involving myself because of a sense of prophetic spirituality, a politics of compassion, and on this, the sides seem clear.
- I am involving myself because of my understanding of baptism, that its rippling impact needs to reach all children, my own, our church's, and our community's, whether they are in the church or beyond it.
- I am involving myself because I love *my* children, and I understand that to love them means that by extension I am called to love *all* children, and a good education is a way that that love can play itself out.
- I am involving myself in this to make a difference in the world that my sovereign God loves so much, loving God and loving my neighbor.

It is funny what you remember from childhood. I remember sitting in a classroom in a school that my dad and many others worked so hard to support. It was a public school, and yet, every so often, someone came around and passed out Bibles, and led us in some kind of exercise, a lesson. It's hard to envision now, and kind of puzzling, how it was permitted, but it happened. What I do remember is a lesson from that time, on the Bible passage that I just read...Matthew 22.

It is iconic as they come. This is a continuation of where we've been all fall, a series of episodes where the authorities interrogate Jesus, trying to catch Jesus, seeking "gotcha" moments, trip him up as if he were a political candidate in another debate. He will have none of it.

"Teacher," they asked snidely, "which commandment is the greatest?" If he chooses wrongly, to them, that will show his indifference to the law, his irreverence about the tradition. He reaches back deep in the tradition, the book of Deuteronomy, where Moses is delivering a kind of commencement/state of the union address all at the same time. Love God with heart, soul, might. Love God with everything.

And then Jesus adds a horizontal, ethical component to the vertical dynamic, so that our sightlines look around as well as up – love your neighbor as yourself. Love God. Love neighbor. Love self. Jesus' response is spot-on, of course, leaving his interrogators nothing to say, and leaving us plenty to consider.

I guess if I had to have a Bible lesson in a public school as a somewhat unsuspecting grade schooler, this was a good choice. Love God. Love neighbor. The message is simple and clear. The implications are radical and profound. The neighbor may be the person who, physically or relationally, lives next door, who we know, and loving them is not so hard. But when someone asked Jesus “who is my neighbor,” you will remember that he answered resoundingly with the Good Samaritan parable, so that the neighbor is someone in trouble *and* someone very different, so there is risk and vulnerability in loving that one, a reach entirely beyond any sense of comfort zone.

Michael Anthony Howard writes that "...when Jesus explains that the law and the prophets all hang on the commandments to love God and love our neighbors, he is inviting his hearers to see that those around them were created in God's image."

That feels so difficult right now, when it is so easy to demonize and vilify and weaponize our words and thoughts. But here it is. Love your neighbor, even those with whom we might disagree. Love your neighbor, even when the problems they are facing seem historic and intractable, like poverty, or racism. No matter – love them.

David Ewart writes that "The ‘love’ that is being called for is not emotion; it is not ‘liking,’ ‘getting along with,’ ‘desiring’" or ‘feeling warm about.’ The ‘love’ Jesus is talking about here is trust, loyalty, enduring devotion, being attached to. You may actually hate your neighbor, but you will still love them in the Biblical sense if you continue to act for their well-being."

What would it look like to act for another’s well-being, when culture and self-preservation teach us otherwise?

It is not easy. Nor is it automatically our nature. That’s why the Pharisees and Sadducees seek to trip Jesus up. They understand, in their heart, I believe, the radical nature of his sense of faith. He is exponentially more radical of a reformer than Luther or Calvin or any of our reforming forbears. In the face of legalism, in the face of the quest for a rulebook, in the face of religion getting things right for their own sake, Jesus instead summarizes the essence of faith as an ethical mandate, faith in action, love in action, that risks all for the sake of the other.

Sarah Dylan Breuer writes that "Despite the frequency with which people turn to Jesus to find out to whom they're NOT obligated, which people under which

circumstances are out of the reach of God's love and therefore are beyond the call of God's people to ministry, Jesus' call will compel each one of his followers to take the fullest extent of God's love to the furthest reach of that love, to every person whom God made."

Prince Raney Rivers writes that "When we invite hearers to love God as Jesus commands, we must point to the world around us at the concrete, tangible ways where this vision of love can be expressed. Show them what the love of God looks like."

So we take the fullest extent of God's love to the furthest reach of that love, to every person whom God made. At its best, it's not enacted with words, or feelings, but actions. Love in action.

We have no corner on the market, but loving neighbor is a distinctly Presbyterian thing to do on this Reformation Day, in this election season, because it assumes no firewall between church and world, that the scope of the God's sovereign love is not bounded by ecclesial limitations, that faith is less about getting your spiritual house in order but in bringing hope and justice to the world's house through acts of profound and radical love.

*Agape* love, as the Greek has it, sacrificial love. It is the kind of love we are called to demonstrate in a season of deep social unrest and racial injustice. It is the kind of love we are called to demonstrate as COVID-19 reveals even more starkly what was already there, deep divisions in economic opportunity.

That's what Reformation does. It lets loose the word, puts it back in the hands and imagination of the people and lets the consequences unfold, what Robert McAfee calls "the risk of reading the Bible."

To sit in this tradition is to engage the word and let that word form us and reform us and transform us. And when Jesus answers the tricksters in this way – love God, love neighbor, and the rest will take care of itself – this is the reforming word at its core, with implications still echoing more than 500 years later, never perfectly and sometimes deeply flawed, but with glimpses here and there of what faithful protest leading to true reformation can look like. Amen.