

“Prayer as Labor: Carried Away” - Sermon on Matthew 22:34-46

Now, you may be asking yourselves, why in the world would Pastor Max be asked to preach on Prayer as Labor on Reformation Sunday? Some of you may be asking yourselves, what is Reformation Sunday? You might be surprised that I asked the same thing when I looked at the Calendar and noticed that it was also my last Sunday here with you, fine folks. Over these last few weeks, I have been reflecting on what I would say in this final Sermon. What passages would I pick, and what direction would this sermon take? Which song would I pay homage to in the title of this sermon? I have also been thinking about what prayer as labor means for us, how it connects to the two greatest commandments and how that ties into the reformation thinkers all the while giving y'all a closing address. It shouldn't be too hard to connect all this in a neat little bow, right? I say this because these aspects relate to our faith and foundations as Christians working to make a difference. That is evident in this passage as well as in the work of the Reformation thinkers through the foundational understanding of the reformed tradition they have provided us. What Christ asks of us, or rather tells us, regarding which of these are the two greatest commandments is as straightforward as one could ask for. However, following them faithfully is a labor in and of itself. In the opening of this passage, we are told that “When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.”¹ It is the same question that, despite having the answer right here, we continue to ask as if we want a better one, an easier one for us to follow. One that doesn't require a lot of work. Often, we do not like the truth that Jesus so plainly tells us. The answer Christ gives isn't hidden in a parable where we need to decipher its meaning for thousands of years, causing major shifts in the church, a scism or two, a reformation here and there. The answer that Christ gives digs right into the heart of who we are called to be. This passage starts with a challenging question in public, and honestly, does anyone enjoy that? Not only does Jesus have to answer this question in public, but it also comes right off the heels of silencing another group of people, the Sadducees. What we can find, whether the lawyer may or may not have been sincere in his question, is that what he asks is near to the center of what really matters in life.² What we have come to discover is that we must continue to work towards that

¹ Matthew 22:34-35 NRSV

² Ibid.

goal of living according to Christ's greatest commandments so that we can be who God called us to be by rising to the challenge of what lies ahead of us.

This challenge presented in the two commandments is not a labor to decipher but a labor to accept and implement into our lives. It is an answer that requires us to work. It is on these two commandments that Jesus told the crowds on that Monday of Holy Week that hang all the law and the prophets.³ It should be the center of what drives all of us to be Christians, to be followers of Christ, and to do the work we are called to do. Key passages such as this one helped drive the Reformers to do what they were called to do and change the church forever. When I think of the work that the Reformation thinkers started, it was a movement of the Spirit and the people to draw themselves closer to God and one another. Now, I'll be honest with y'all; I have not spent much time looking over, reading, or studying the reformation since leaving Seminary. All the theses, institutes, early Reformation-era church documents, and lists of rules in the confessional documents are not exactly page-turners. Don't get me wrong, I love our long list of rules. Whether it be the event that jumpstarted everything with Luther and the 95 Theses or Calvin and his institutes, the work they set out to do is the foundation from which our polity was formed. Christians of the past fought tirelessly to be able to create these documents and have a voice, but sometimes, I am left scratching my head at the questions others have asked me about these documents. For instance, I was recently asked about my baptism during the examination process to be accepted into another Presbytery. For those who do not know or want to know the context behind this question, it came up because I was baptized at some point when I was 12 or 13. It occurred the same day I was confirmed as a Presbyterian. My parents had not realized until I was in confirmation class when the Pastor asked a simple question about when I was baptized. The date and age of this important event is something that I have simply accepted in my life, and I have not spent much time reflecting on it and have never been asked anything deeper regarding it. That was until a recent examination day a little over 16 years later. Now, this committee examining me had asked me many questions, some on topic, some regarding faith, and some off-topic, all focused on getting to know me more. Typical committee stuff. Didn't think much of it and came prepared to answer questions regarding my Faith Statement, my experience, and some general information about myself. Then, I was asked a question that left me, on camera mind you, literally scratching my head with a confused look. I was asked by another minister, "Rev.

³ Ibid.

Michaels, I see that you were baptized when you were about 12 years old; what do you believe were some of the Reformation thinkers that helped influence your decision to be baptized.” A few seconds of silence followed because, again, I was visibly confused and trying to understand what he was asking me. I honestly thought I misheard him for a second, but then I followed up the question with another question and asked, “Do you mean who were the reformation thinkers that influenced my decision to be baptized *when I was 12* or how I look back on it now? Because when I was 12 I was only thinking about Star Wars, football, and how I could get out of practicing the saxophone.” The reason I am mentioning this story is because I do not often find myself reflecting on events throughout my life in conjunction to writings by Calvin, John Knox, Luther, or the other Reformation thinkers. They just do not come up as often as you think in casual conversation in a building and grounds, finance or missions meeting. What I came to this meeting, or examination, prepared to talk about was my work, what I was passionate about in ministry, my calling, my faith statement, and other matters that I felt were important to the meeting. I even joked shortly after he clarified and said, “My apologies, but I did not read up on my Institutes before coming to the meeting.” I did not realize we had some required reading. In all honesty, I have not thought much about the Institutes since completing my Theology Exam for the Presbyterian Church. That is not to say that there is no merit to what they have to offer; in fact, the framework for reformed theology is what the Presbyterian Church is built upon. The work that they did has helped lay a foundation for our reformed and ever-reforming tradition. Now, I do not believe that this Minister was trying to trip me up like the challenging question posed to Jesus, nor do I believe I handled the situation poorly. However, there are often times when we are asked questions that leave us confused and scratching our heads. Questions about our own faith, questions about our history, about what we wish to do in the future, our hopes and aspirations, and sometimes we are just given questions which can catch us by surprise.

Now, I have been asked many questions in my short time in Ministry, and oftentimes, while it is important to look to our reformed tradition, I do not often find myself quoting Calvin, Dr. King, Bonhoeffer, or many of the other reformers during the day to day operations of the church. While Calvin and the other reformers can help us uplift our understanding of scripture and how we govern ourselves, which are necessary for our church, they do not always encompass what is right in front of us. Their writings do not always cover the work *we* have to do. The service to which we must provide for those who are in need. While these reformed

thinkers were influenced by scripture and the greatest commandments, they are time capsules into our past. If we are reformed and ever reforming, we must pay respects where they are due to our foundations. However, we must also accept that things change and there is work right in front of us to do. Their ideas and what they stood and worked for, what they *labored* for, should complement the teachings of Christ, but never replace them. There is a challenge that lies ahead, and we can look to the past to assist us, but it is something that we must all face now.

This challenge is not undertaken in isolation. It cannot be solved individually. The challenge that Christ has placed before, the challenge that the Christians of the Reformation undertook to create a space inclusive of God's creation, ensuring that we have a say, that we have a voice, must be undertaken in community. It requires our investment in the future ministries of this church. Last week, when I was with the HeBrews talking about a book that should be focused on Johnny Cash, however halfway through and we have talked a lot more about Hank Williams, one of the fellas had an interesting take on how he views his life as a father. He said that for such a long time, he kept working to make his parents proud, doing things in a way that would honor them. However, he came across something that changed his mind. He read an article online that another parent wrote, and they said they used to do the same until they had a kid. Now, they do everything they can to make a better world for them. Doing things that would make their children proud. Now, I am not a parent, but this sentiment spoke to me because this is what I hope the goal for not just this church but all churches should be. That being that we should be thinking about the next generation. If the church is to continue, we need to create a space that is welcoming to them. A space that demonstrates not only the love of God but also the genuine love of your neighbor as you also love yourself. When the Reformation occurred, it shook the very world of Christianity, and centuries later, we exist because of the sacrifices of the Christians during that period. It is a legacy we must embrace, but now it is our turn. Now, we must equally work hard to create spaces for the future. Friends, we both have so much work that needs to be done right in front of us. There is a challenge that I wish to see you all rise to, and I know you can do it. Christ's command of love is clear. When faced with great adversity, I know that you are in the most capable hands, but this is something that you must tackle together. To lean on one another, to respect one another, to listen to each other, and to help build a place that will bring back those who feel lost. This means that you must "love the Lord your God with all

your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”⁴ However, this is where the hard part comes in: you must also “love your neighbor as yourself.” For it is on these two commandments that hang everything we are called to do. That is your prayer as labor. For if you do not help this church out, if you do not invest your time into the work that needs to be done, if you do not help out those who have been carrying these torches for decades if you only reap the rewards of the work of the community, then are you really loving your neighbor as yourself? Are you loving God with all your heart? Within a community, there is always work that needs to be done. Serve a meal with any of the mission committee teams. Come out to a music event, support your theatre, really support more local theatre in general. Join one of the many classes that are going on around the church throughout the week and on Sundays. Get to know this community and help them out with their labors. Love them as yourself by coming out to support any of the various teams' events and the work they have set out to do. Help out and make a stand against the new jail. Help keep Fort Wayne clean and recycle. Help support the local teachers and students. Let your staff that works tirelessly to keep this building going know that they are loved and appreciated by you. I know you are all capable of rising to this challenge because I have gotten to know all of you, and I wish that you would all get to know one another. To stand as a community that takes on the work that needs to be done together. I believe you are called to do this work set before you because the Lord our God is with you always. Amen.

⁴ Matt. 22:37