**The Protestant Principle**

**Text: Matthew 22:36-40**

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**Reformation Sunday**

You’ve probably heard the story many times: Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk who recognized that the Church was in serious trouble. So serious that he believed that, at the very least, a Church-wide debate was in order. Thus it was that on October 31, 1517 – the last Sunday in October – he nailed 95 theses – or 95 debating points – to the church door in Wittenberg, in what is now Germany. Now nailing his list to the church door was neither as heroic nor courageous as we might think, because in those days the church door doubled as the town bulletin board. So, if he wanted to start a debate, where else was he going to nail his debating points?

What was more courageous – and what more likely actually happened – is that on that All Hallows Eve in 1517, Luther *mailed* his 95 theses to the Pope. I mean, if you want to launch a Church-wide debate, you don’t just post your position locally, you send it to the head of the Church. So Luther did, and the Pope was not amused. In the ensuing push-back and arguments and trials and wars that followed, Luther’s effort to reform the Church exploded into what became known as the Reformation: a movement that reformed not only the church but much of western civilization, and whose reverberations continue down to the present day.

At the heart of the Reformation was the notion that theologian Paul Tillich has called the Protestant Principle. This is the idea that only God is Absolute. All else is temporary and subject to decay and change. Ideas about God, liturgical practices that praise God, programs that serve God, structures in Church and society that incorporate the principles of God: these are all human constructs which are destined to pass away. These things may point to God, and when they were new and fresh they may well have served God, but with the passage of time comes the passing of the faithfulness of any such human creation. The ideas and the tools that we develop to serve God will fade away over time; and they should fade away, because only God remains. It was on the basis of this Protestant Principle that Luther attacked many of the ideas and practices of the 16th century Church, basing his protest on scripture alone; seeking to ground his protest in that which is eternal as the only sound basis for attacking that which is temporal but *pretends* to be eternal.

Something of the Protestant Principle is reflected in today’s scripture lesson; the familiar passage in which Jesus states the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. If God is the only Absolute reality, then love is the only absolute ethical directive. Everything that we say and do ought to be based on loving God and loving all that God loves. “On these two commandments hang all of the law and the prophets,” Jesus says (Mt. 22:40). In other words, “These two commandments serve as the basis for all of the moral teachings of our tradition.” And that which perhaps once served the law of love, but no longer does, ought to be reformed, changed and – if need be – consigned to the trash bin of history.

For example: there was a time – early on in the Protestant era – when the local pastor was the authoritative word on all manner of things. That’s because he – and they were all men in those days – he was usually the most educated member of the community; sometimes the *only* educated member of the community. But this is no longer the case, because the Reformation launched the movement toward universal literacy. If everything ought to be grounded in God’s eternal Word, then everyone ought to be able to read. Otherwise, how are you going to be able to read scripture? How are you going to be able to discern for yourself what God is saying? So, as the Reformation expanded, literacy and education expanded, and communities evolved to the point where *many* people were educated, not just the local pastor. And where loving God and neighbor had once been best served by listening to the learned knowledge of just one person – the preacher – now *lots* of folks had an informed perspective on things, and *lots* of folks needed to be consulted on various matters if God and neighbor were to be well-loved and well-served. Lots of folks, *including* the preacher, I might add. But the old order, where the pastor *alone* ran the show, had to pass away if God was still to be served. Only *God* is Absolute; particular forms of serving God are temporal and destined to decay. And that’s a lesson which some churches, where the pastor continues to run things in near dictatorial fashion, still need to learn. The Church is still, and always will be, in need of reform.

God alone is Absolute. Loving God and neighbor is what the Church is called to do at all times, and everywhere. On this, all of the Protestant Reformers – Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and Menno Simmons and the whole bunch of them – agreed. What they disagreed on was their ideas *about* God. What they disagreed on was *how* to love God and neighbor in any concrete situation. And that’s part of the reason why the Protestant branch of the Church is divided into so many denominations and conflicting traditions. They couldn’t agree; and they couldn’t even agree to *disagree*! Ideas *about* God were raised to an absolute level, as if those ideas *where* God. Feeble human attempts to try to *understand* God were strictly identified with the *reality* of God, who is shrouded in mystery and partially beyond knowing. In other words, Protestants have betrayed their own principle. They took temporal things and pretended that they were eternal. And the Protestant Principle is *still* betrayed whenever people insist that *their* truth is *the* Truth: and they *refuse* to compromise, and they *demonize* their opponents, and they will not *change*.

As we said, the protest movement known as the Reformation led to reforms not only in the Church but throughout western civilization: Church doctrine and practice were to be based on scripture alone. Clergy and laity should be educated so that they could read and understand the scriptures; so that they could clearly hear the Word. Once each individual could approach God and learn about God on his or her own, that created social space for the individual, and with it greater individual freedom and initiative. That, in turn, led to economic and political reforms that came to be called capitalism and democracy. And, as literacy increased – as education increased – so increased the tools that could be used to understand this world that God created; hence the rise of science. And the tools for better caring for one another; hence medicine and social work. All of these are ways of loving God and neighbor. The particular tools may change. The particular forms of those tools may change. Old methods fade away. New methods come into being. God alone is eternal. And we become attached to the particular tools and methods and forms at our own peril.

The psalmist puts it this way:

“As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone…but the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 103:15-17).

The Protestant Principle has any number of implications for church and society and for our own individual lives. Let me touch, just briefly, on 3 of them.

First: It has been said that the last 7 words of a dying church are: “We’ve never done it that way before.” That’s a church that clings far too tightly to worship forms or ministry programs that were once faithful and innovative and in tune with contemporary spiritual needs, but are no more. Such clinging to a particular way of being the church may still serve the needs of those who are already in the pews, but not those whom you’d like to draw into the life of the congregation. What works for our current members may not be a good was to evangelize new member. Old hymns that we dearly love were once new and creative and contemporary. That alone should tell us that we need to be open to new worship material, even as we retain the best of the old. To the extent that our beloved hymns continue to praise the eternal God and serve God by drawing new people into the church, then it is good that we continue to sing them. But there is always room as well for *new* hymns and *new* music in the life of the church. Even some of the hymns that we think of as beloved golden oldies are not really all that old. For example, *How Great Thou Art* was written in 1953. *Pass It On* was written in 1969. In terms of the broad sweep of church history, that’s *new*! The key test is not how old or new something is, but how *faithful* it is, whether or not it is old or new; how faithful it is to the eternal God who makes all things new!

Second: When we talk about the United States being founded on Christian principles, we need to be aware that it was *especially* founded on the *Protestant* Principle. That is to say, the Founders understood that only God is Perfect, and particular laws and policies – which are human creations designed to serve God – must be hammered out in the political forum of give and take and compromise. If I understand that God alone is Absolute and Perfect, then I can compromise on my particular way of understanding how to serve God, and how to reflect such service of God in legislation, because I might be wrong; or my ideas might be outdated. And I have to be careful about demonizing you – my opponent – and your particular ideas about legislation and policy because you might be right, or your ideas might be more attuned to the shifting times than mine are. It is neither you nor I who is absolutely right, it is neither your legislation nor mine that is absolutely right, only *God* is absolutely right. Everything else is subject to compromise. As James Madison – who was one of the few Founders with a theological education – as Madison knew, if my party is in power and I try to impose my ideas and only my ideas on the nation, as if I’m absolutely right and my ideas are absolutely right, then I’m insulting and dishonoring the God who alone really is absolutely right, the God who alone is Sovereign, the God who alone is to be loved and served and worshipped and adored!

Third: Any individual or church that seeks to live according to the Protestant Principle must be grounded in the Word, and in prayer, and the Presence of the eternal God. It is important to have the *idea* of God’s absolute nature fixed in my mind, but I also need my heart and my spirit attuned to the eternal wisdom of God. And that will happen only if I’m reading the scriptures and praying regularly and thus experiencing the Presence and the power of God. I mean, if I’m not grounded in the firm foundation that is the Word of God and the Presence of God, then I’m going to have as my foundation something that is moving and drifting and decaying. And as it starts to dissolve under my feet, I’m going to get anxious and scared; I’m going to try to cling that much harder to the thing that which is fading away, and I’m more prone to get angry at you if you’re advocating the removal of this failing foundation upon which I’m trying to stand. Which is why the words of the old hymn remain valid and faithful today:

“On Christ the solid Rock I stand,

all other ground is sinking sand;

all other ground is sinking sand.”

You have to stand on the absolute foundation of God, not as you or I imagine it to be but as God reveals it to be: through Word and prayer and mystical experience.

One of the toughest times in my life was my first year in seminary. All sorts of ideas that I held near and dear were being challenged, and for a while I didn’t know what to believe. And the more I was challenged, and the more uncertain I became, the more depressed I became. I went to seminary in New England, and one afternoon, in all of my confusion and depression and despair, I found myself sitting and weeping in a typical New England plain white sanctuary. And as I looked around at those stark white walls, those clear glass windows – no decorations, no banners, no stained glass, nothing to distract or trap my attention – just the stark beauty of those unadorned walls, with a raised pulpit (symbolizing the primacy of the Word) looking out over those empty pews, it hit me that none of those ideas or images or ways of being the Church that I was trying to cling to – *none* of those things – ultimately mattered. They could all be washed away, and still God would be the same; still the Word would remain, and that would be okay. There was comfort and power in that insight. God had put me on a firm foundation. And I was able to carry on.

When you think about it, it’s almost laughable that we cling so tightly to our ideas and our ways of doing things. For these are but imperfect reflections of the eternal perfection of God. These are but things that we see in a glass darkly. The only Reality to which we should cling is that which we will only see clearly in the life beyond. As St. Paul says, now we see in a mirror dimly, then we will see face to face. Now we know in part, then we will know fully. For only when the perfect comes – only when Jesus returns in all of his glory – will the imperfect pass away (see 1 Corinthians 13:8-12).

God alone is Absolute. All else is destined to fade away. In the meantime, what we have to guide our lives is faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love. Amen.