

In Connecticut and Maine, where I grew up, the roads are different. Most weren't planned or plotted, but rather they evolved. Many, if not most, began as something else: a deer trail, a Native American travel line, a cowpath, or maybe the only place one could get a wagon between hills. It's often hard to find a straight section, nevermind a whole road, and winter driving requires real caution.

Given the cardinal and logical layout of roads in this area, one could imagine driving a straightaway would allow a driver to run a stick through the steering wheel, brace it against the door, and have hands free to text your significant other the great American novel. However, you know that to be nonsense, because in actuality, even to drive the straightest of roads, you need to make constant steering adjustments—dozens a minute—to avoid the ditch.

I think it's a helpful way to think about our celebration of the Reformation. To celebrate the 16<sup>th</sup> century schism created by the critical thinking of Martin Luther and similarly-minded scholars and opposed by Pope Leo X, previously known as Giovanni de 'Medici, might be helpful in memorializing the historical event, but would miss the opportunity to carry on the faithfulness Martin Luther, Jan Hus, John Calvin, St. Francis, John Wycliffe, and others. We are better off to continue in their footsteps by seeking fidelity to God, Christ as seen in scripture and continually revealed to us.

This is the gift of any great reformer. They help their followers to strip away that which obfuscates in order to uncover a former and deeper truth. Great reformers don't build new truths, but instead make clearer more essential truth that had become lost, clouded, or misconstrued. They don't take us off in new directions, but they adjust the steering wheel to return us to the straight road.

And if we are honest, we need reformations more often than once every 1500, 500, 100 or... Goodness, if we are honest, we need corrections in our faith lives as frequently as steering wheel adjustments are needed to keep a car going straight down a country road—continually!

Jesus was a reformer in the same way. Born into a Jewish household, educated as a Jew, then studied and learned from Jewish scholars. Many believe that Jesus himself was a Pharisee, a group that sought complete congruence with the laws of scripture. We have no indication that Jesus sought to depart from the laws that had come before; rather,

Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (Matthew 5:17)

When Jesus is approached by Pharisees and a lawyer among them questions Jesus, asking him to identify the greatest of the commandments, we see yet another example of the rhetorical sparring these religious leaders bring to Jesus. Discussion, exploration, and argument over the law in scripture was the very purpose for being a Pharisee. Questioning Jesus was their way of digging for truth and vetting the Rabbi. Previous interrogations by Sadducees, Scribes, and Pharisees left them outwitted by the 30 year old.

Sparring with him again, the question of the greatest commandment was not new. This was part of a philosophical tradition examining ultimate goodness. Socrates asked what the greatest good was and identified it as virtue in the examined life 400 years earlier.

Jesus could have responded to the Pharisee lawyer in myriad ways. His own teachings seemed revolutionary to some of his followers and his following kept growing. Yet, the one who said he came not to abolish the law but fulfill it quotes from it—reaching back to the first five books of the Torah, in which 613 commandments may be found. He quotes first the ancient Shema, in Deuteronomy 6:

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

And then continues by quoting Leviticus 18:

<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

On these commandments lay all the law and the prophets, in essence, all of scripture should be seen through these commands, Jesus says, from scripture dating back more than a thousand years. Jesus, in a re-centering adjustment, calls for focus on some of the oldest thought, oldest scripture of Judaism.

“Three loves,” we might say. Love God, love neighbor, love yourself. This is the hermeneutic, the interpretive lens through which we must read all the rest of scripture. In other words, we must check our understanding of anything said of faith against these words.

The lawyer asked Jesus to identify the greatest commandment and as usual, Jesus’ answer didn’t fit the question nicely; he doesn’t give one commandment, but two: love God wholly, and love your neighbor as yourself. One without the other misses the mark

entirely—and yet so many of good intention have and do just this—because we can't love God without caring for neighbor and we can't love our neighbor without loving God.

In *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, Søren Kierkegaard says, "If a man in truth wills the Good then he must be willing to suffer all for the Good." Kierkegaard's words remind us that Jesus' words are more than just a moral maxim—they point to the Word made flesh, his full incarnation in which he will suffer and die and rise again out of love for his neighbor and even his persecutor. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus will remind his disciples that fulfillment of these commandments, the love of neighbor and love of God, are also the way of the cross. (Sunday, October 25, 2020, Lectionary 30, 2020) Our faith, prioritizing God and neighbor, must have cost. If not, our faith is cheap and worth nothing. So, what will we pay, what will we risk, to prioritize neighbor and God?

I am challenged by the witness of Dorothy Day. She is often credited with saying, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least." Reflecting on her words this week, I am forced to ask, if this is so, do I love God at all? I am pained to consider the answer.

And yet, give heed and let the words of Jesus wash over us— For he who said them was willing to give all for whom he loved: every single sinner round the world who lived before, lives now, and will live in the future.

The words were spoken in response as the greatest command. Yet remember, they were spoken by God who is love through the lips of the human embodiment of love. Love God, love your neighbor as yourself.

Please pray with me. O God of all goodness, we thank you for the life and witness of your Son, Jesus Christ. We give thanks for Reformers including St. Francis, Martin Luther, Calvin, Martin Luther King Jr., and Dorothy Day, who help return us to what is central for faithful living. You graciously hold us with love. Warm our hearts that we too may love as you have given. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

*Sunday, October 25, 2020, Lectionary 30.* (2020, October 25). Retrieved from [sundaysandseasons.com](https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-10-25/2129#resources):  
<https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-10-25/2129#resources>