Sermon on Proper 31 2021 (Reformation Sunday)
(Ruth 1:1-18; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34)

On this day in the year 1517 the Western world changed irrevocably; on October 31st of that year an Augustinian monk, a professor of the Scriptures, a person who had in the past years experienced deep personal anguish and depression, often thinking himself doomed to hell, nailed a parchment to the heavy wooden door of the castle church of the German town of Wittenberg.

Thus was set in motion the slow death of medieval Europe and the emergence of the modern world.

What the man, Martin Luther, nailed to that door were 95 theses; points for dispute, discussion, points like, and here I’m picking out two of the main ones and paraphrasing: “The Bible should be the central authority of the Church, not the Pope or Tradition.” And “People are saved by faith not by any particular good works that they perform.”

These were not abstract points of theology or doctrine, not to Luther, they were nothing less than the royal road to flee the terror and dread he had lived under straight into the house of a gracious God.

The evidence is sparse but there’s enough to show us, evidence like the delightful Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, that the average medieval person did not live with the same degree of Luther’s existential dread.

At the same time, in the words of the Oxford historian of Christianity Diarmaid MacCulloch, “the church had become a death industry.” Masses were said for the dead in order to lesson their time in purgatory; indulgences were sold in order to lesson the time a relative might spend in purgatory.

And the Church often preached, to her financial advantage, that the balance of good deeds might not be enough to outweigh the balance of sins committed in one’s life.

This was reinforced by the image of Christ that predominated at the time: the awesome, fearsome Son of Man, the Great Judge who would separate the wheat from the chaff at the Judgement of Souls. Fear was the constant threat of the age.

If Christianity was to survive, to somehow match with the psyche of the average person who needed to live from hope towards joy, who needed to know that love, not fear, is what fuels daily living, then the Church had to reform.

Most everyone knew it, it was the open secret of the age, Luther just happened to call the question, as it were.

We Anglicans participated in the Reformation in a unique way. The Church leaders who wanted reform played to King Henry’s fear of no male heir so that when Henry broke from Rome it wasn’t so much for reasons of doctrine as it was for reasons of politics.

This trend continued when the monasteries were shut down not so much for reasons of theology as the greed of Thomas Cromwell’s officials who wanted to become landed gentry.

In England and in all Europe, Reform was undertaken, not in the spirit of Luther’s 95 theses: open discussion and dispute, but under the cover of a fear as deep and damaging as the fear of purgatory’s fire.

Those who called themselves reformers were often as likely to burn “heretics” as the medieval church!

It was only slowly and gradually that the true spirit of reform was able to come alive in the Anglican church leading to a unique level of dissent within England, a level that first led to civil war but later to more openness and inclusion of diverse ways of thinking and believing.

In particular, the emphasis of the Anglicans came to be not one common way of *thinking* about God, Christ or the Christian life, but of common *praying*, coming together in the presence of God, using agreed upon words to submit our lives before the Divine Mystery, asking for grace and mercy together in whatever state or condition we find ourselves in.

Anglican think of themselves as Reformed Catholics. We’ve held on to far more of the great tradition than most Reformation churches, things like Cathedrals, Bishops, priests, the centrality of the Holy Eucharist.

Because of that, in a type of pride, we don’t think of ourselves as a true Reformation Church, but we are! We believe in reformed and always reforming! At our best we believe in truth wherever we find it, in the great tradition, in the new learning of the present moment. The Bible, Tradition, Reason and Experience all in conversation.

Truth refracted poetically through stained glass and the Sacraments.

And so, I dare say, in reference to our gospel reading, with differences of course, this is similar to the vision of Jesus: when Jesus enters in the disputes that he does with the religious leaders of the day he does so from the impulse of reform.

As Luther never imagined that he’d have to leave the Catholic Church, so Jesus probably never sought to start a new religion but sought a widescale and comprehensive reform of Judaism, a reform of Judaism that would look as much to the Abrahamic covenant as it would to the Mosaic Covenant of Law.

The promise to Abraham and Sarah was that if they adventured with God and learned of God and followed God as sojourners (one way of thinking about that is as lifelong learners), through them all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Instead of being concerned with merely their own progeny, their own ethnic identity, the mission of Israel was to be as a light to the nations.

The challenge before Jesus was how to start a movement of reform the immediacy of God’s promise without leaving behind all the developments of Moses, David and the rest of the scriptures.

More importantly, how to bring reform to Israel when the nation’s religious/political leaders are determined to undermine him at every turn; when they seem determined to protect only their own interests?

He’s not naïve about the motives behind most questions that are asked of him; he knows that much of the time, if it’s a religious leader questioning him, the motive is entrapment, the motive is to discredit him.

He’s just been dealing with the Sadduccees who think that they’ve proved Resurrection as a non-reality from Moses but Jesus has shown that they’ve been missing the living God that Abraham, Isaac and Moses knew!

One of the religious leaders who’s been listening in is impressed. It appears he’s ready for a genuine dispute, a genuine interchange, maybe genuine reformation.

He asks a question “what’s the greatest commandment?” Jesus answers not so much with a particular commandment but with Moses great exhortation when he’s finished giving the nation the law in the book of Deuteronomy, the call to live into a complete and total love for God.

He joins this to a line taken out of the book of Leviticus which Moses uses in the context of the risky move of speaking up for someone who is on trial for his life, or the deep courage required to lay the desire to hate aside when someone has done something bad to you.

The one who’s impressed and has asked the question, mirrors back what Jesus says, in agreement, but then he does something that is at the heart of reform; he applies it to himself in a way that undermines his self-interest; he shows he’s truly heard Jesus by speaking against the particular death industry that was at the heart of the power wielded by the teacher’s of the law and the priests: the sacrificial system.

“To Love God completely and to love your neighbour as yourself, is more important than to offer animals and other sacrifices to God.”

Just as the poor suffered under the death industry of the medieval church, the need to purchase indulgences and pay for masses for the dead, so the poor of Jesus’ day struggled to afford the sacrificial system to stay on God’s good side.

Jesus acknowledges the man’s wisdom; this man is on his way to getting it. True reform opens the door to a gracious God for everyone; it lets go of institutional control and economic advantage.

Mark notes that after this exchange, “no one dared ask Jesus any more questions.” Why? Because, I think, they recognized their own unwillingness to change;

we need to ask questions, but true reform comes to us only if we have the willingness to hear the truth of the answers to the questions we ask.

What needed to be reformed in Jesus’ day was the sacrificial system itself, what needed to be reformed in the Reformation period was a different kind of sacrificial system.

To do so it was necessary to recovery the central promise to Abraham and Sarah, in Luther’s time, the Good News of God’s Gracious forgiveness accessed by faith.

What needs to be reformed today? What is proving itself to be the disease of our age, especially in the church?

I’m sure we could all offer opinions because that is indeed what we do: we are individualists; we curate our own truth from whatever sources we feel suit us; like those who did not dare ask Jesus any more questions one of the diseases of our age is put ourselves in silos that help us avoid those questions that might shake us in our view of the world.

But what it means to be a disciple, to be like this questioner, is to embrace the way of Christ, which is the way of love, the way of radical love that is willing to have our own privileged positions questioned.

This vision is Shalom; it is to see our individuality, important yes, in light of the wider community; if we try to curate the truth, our lives on our own, we miss the Love that is at the center of everything.

Will you dare tack your questions to Christ; will we allow him to tack his insights to our hearts?

You may fear that the call to a total love is too daunting, too difficult, but actually, it’s every other approach, a holding back of love, a holding back of our lives that leads to fear, division, personal anguish and disappointment.

It is the word “love” that explains the commitment of Ruth to Naomi; and the dawning commitment of this man of the law in our gospel text. Our possibility of reform is born of the Love that was willing to go to the cross to put an end to all sacrificial systems and our dead works, so that Ruth, so that this man, so that you and I could and can sojourn with God in freedom, in a spirit of adventure.