

Formed and Reformed by the Word

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and Mark 12: 28-34

We are in a moment in our national life when we are facing big questions -- who are we, what is America, what will our future look like. There are other questions, more specific perhaps, but no less monumental, including the long-term impact of COVID or how we can make real progress on climate change or gun violence or racial justice. Big questions, sometimes feeling overwhelming, because either we think we are so divided that we can't even have a civil conversation about them, or, the problems are so big, the issues so complex, that it's too late, that real difference can't be made.

And yet...I try to remember several things. I remember that history has shown that we can address big questions if we summon the collective political and moral will. I remember our two twenty-something children, and any sense of responsibility and accountability which means that I must do what I can now to leave to them a world where they can prosper and thrive. I remember that I am not optimistic, ever, but that I am hopeful, that my faith must make a difference.

One of the ways we engage these questions, make progress, is through our history. But even that feels fraught right now. Because of our divisions, we battle over how we understand our past. Simplistically stated – how is our history to be approached? As something to be enshrined? Or rejected? Or something more complex than that?

Think about a family history – what you talk about and what you don't talk about, and how not talking – even about the bad things – can make things worse. I believe that we can be strong enough, faithful enough, even, to learn from our history, to engage it, peaks and valleys, and move ahead neither beholden to our past nor ignorant of it.

This is a day for that, in a way. Reformation Sunday. I don't mean to give a history lesson this morning, but perhaps it's helpful to remember that on this day, October 31, Halloween, All Hallow's Eve, the day before All Saints Day, in 1517, the rural German Roman Catholic priest Martin Luther tacked 95 theses, disputations, points of difference, on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. It's probably not overdramatizing it to say that with a few hammer strikes, Luther dropped a pebble into a pond, not just the church history pond, but the world history pond, and that we are feeling the ripples even now, 504 years later.

Luther was not interested in starting a new church, let alone the Protestant reformation, let alone a movement that influenced science and commerce and politics and art. He was interested in reforming his church. And again, simplistically stated, Luther's actions spread. For us, we who stand in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, from John Calvin in Switzerland to England and the Netherlands and John Knox in Scotland, to this country, and many other places, nowhere as linear and neat and tidy as all of that. Imperfect people – men and women, though we learn mostly about the men, who articulated important ideas and implemented them incompletely and imperfectly within imperfect institutions, and sometimes with tragic results.

What do we do with that history? How do we learn from it, how do we engage it, how are we shaped by it, while neither lionizing it nor rejecting it completely? There were important values and practices affirmed by those very imperfect forbears in our lineage, values that can sustain the scrutiny of history and still matter today, still make a difference. They are still worth lifting up.

They can still matter, these trajectories from our tradition. The belief that we are saved by grace, and not by works. The notion that all are called and given gifts, and not just some. And this – the notion that the word, we call it, the Bible, is a living, breathing document that still speaks to us. We all have access to it, and not just some.

The Bible shapes our faith and life so much more than a rule book containing a restrictive list of do's and don'ts or a roadmap to heaven.

That's what is happening today – twice – to the people of Israel and to the community-in-formation gathered around Jesus' ministry. Two instances where

the word is more than words, but a formative power that gives shape to who we are and how we live together.

We focus on the version of the Ten Commandments from the book of Exodus, but there is a second version found in the book of Deuteronomy, coming to the Bible from different sources via different paths. They are set within a narrative, a history. This makes sense, I believe. We obey our parents because we trust them, do the drills a coach tells us to do because we know that coach, follow a teacher's instruction because we believe that teacher cares about us.

Moses, speaking to the Israelite people, reminds them that they have a history with this God, making the commandments more than a set of rules, but a framework for how to live together in community. This God liberated them. Plus the benefits – did you get that? Live like this and your home will be secure, your generations will flourish, the land will be good to you. If you do these things – love God with heart and soul and might – and if you teach them to your children, to future generations, life will be good.

This was part of Luther's issue, some centuries later. He believed that the church that he served had forgotten its history, and rather than forming a people based on a sense of covenantal relationship, the church was being organized around a set of restrictive beliefs and behaviors that the rich could buy themselves out of. A clear misuse of history, ignoring the deeper claim of the word.

Jesus took that value, that vision, and magnified it. Some scribes, teachers, were debating. Which commandment is first of all, they ask Jesus? Jesus goes right to Deuteronomy. He establishes that there is only one God. Then this – love God with heart, soul, mind and strength. Sound familiar, with a slight variation? He continues – love neighbor as self.

Jesus reaches back into the tradition, to its heart, its core, and he does what we are called to do – discern how we are formed and reformed now by the word that gave that tradition shape and that shapes us yet.

It is amazing, but perhaps not so surprising, that once we notice something as if for the first time that it keeps appearing. In Matthew 25, we love God by loving those in need. Faith is incomplete without compassion, and service. Our

stewardship theme seeks to echo that – we gather, we bless, we serve. Jesus, teaching the word from his history and ours, claims that same cadence of faith.

Love God. We do that in worship, to be sure, in our gathering, in our praying, in our singing. We do that as we learn as well. That's why we Presbyterians have placed such a high premium on education, for all ages, in the church and in the world. The life of the soul is strengthened as the mind is strengthened. Love God in prayer, in song, in heart, in mind.

Love neighbor as well. That is not a secondary consideration for Jesus. It seems fitting that we focus on social witness, mission, on a Reformation Sunday. We love our neighbor in many ways. For today, the focus is on gun violence, remembering victims and their families through a heart-wrenching t-shirt display and through evocative portraits, and further loving our neighbors by addressing the root causes of gun violence, which certainly include the availability of guns themselves, but also systemic racism and structural poverty.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. Did you notice? Love God – yes. Love neighbor – absolutely. And one more – love your neighbor as yourself. Self-care as an act of faith, not as a selfish act but as a clear mandate from Jesus. One way to look at it is that we can't love God or neighbor if our own hearts and minds and spirits and even bodies are not prepared for the task.

I hope you will attend Second Hour following this service as we look at the continuing impact of COVID-19. Our tendency is to move on, to sweep a difficult past under the rug. Doing so with COVID without acknowledging the deep trauma we have experienced, our collective grief, is not healthy at all, for any of us and for all of us. How can we learn from this recent history as we pivot to the future? Facing our grief, our trauma, seems to me to be a profound form of loving self, working toward the social and emotional and spiritual health we will need to address the big issues we face.

That Jesus would refer to Deuteronomy would not have been a surprise – love God with heart and soul and might. His radical move is connecting love of God with love of neighbor and self. His own life, as the Word of God incarnate, shapes our life.

Chelsey Harmon writes that “Agreeing with and understanding the idea/the law/the commandment get(s) us close to the Kingdom of God, but obeying it through action is what actually shows that we are part of God’s Kingdom of flourishing. How we live shows whether we have gone ‘all in’ for the love of God, ourselves, and others.”

How we live shows whether we have gone “all in” for the love of God, ourselves and others. This holistic, integrated view of faith is not exclusive to us. Martin Luther and John Calvin and countless other reformers – named and unnamed, remembered by history and remembered in the heart of God – sensed that the church had gone all in on the wrong thing, a misguided understanding of what loving God looked like, a warped view of loving self and an abandonment of the commitment to love neighbor. We remember that history today – imperfect and incomplete as it may be. But more than that, we give thanks for ways that that history shapes us, for the better, and for the ways that the word continues to work itself out in our lives.

Francis of Assisi, some 300 years before Luther, was reputed to have said “Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words.” We get that. We love our words. Yet what we have learned is that words matter in forming and reforming, in empowering us to love God and self and neighbor, if we will be open to them, open to the reforming Spirit. Happy Reformation Day. No tricks – only treats. Amen.