

Looking Backward, Looking Forward

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Matthew 22:36-40 — “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

So, 500 years ago, a man named Martin Luther, a German monk and professor of theology, published a list of 95 statements opposing certain practices in the church. Legend has it that Luther actually nailed this document, called the 95 Theses, on the door of a famous church in Wittenberg, Germany. Whether or not he actually did that, Luther’s message of reform spread like wildfire: it spread to Switzerland, where a man named John Calvin popularized the message and put his own spin on it; it spread to France, where reformers were violently persecuted by the state and church alike; it spread throughout Europe, and eventually, throughout the world. All of the Christian traditions that we call “Protestant”—which includes Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, and many others—all of these traditions can trace their origins back to Martin Luther and the 95 theses 500 years ago.

Throughout Christian history, there have been a lot of reform movements, in fact. The Second Vatican Council, back in the 60s, is a more recent example. And whether modern or ancient or somewhere in between, almost all church reform movements have tried to do two things. First, as you might guess, they have tried to make change, to do things differently, to shake things up. At the same time, though, they have also tried to recover various things from the past. For the most part, the change that church reform movements are trying to make is not utterly new; they’re trying to regain something that was lost, trying to return to the way things were. So, reformers are doing both of these things simultaneously. They are making change for the future, and they are trying to recover the past. They are shaking things up, and they are reviving old values. They are looking forward, and they are looking backward. This morning, as we celebrate this auspicious anniversary, I want to share with you how I see the work of the Protestant reformers as both a looking backward and a looking forward, and then I want to share with you how I see Jesus, in our second reading this morning, inviting us today to look both backward and forward.

Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers saw themselves as looking back towards Scripture. That’s the old old value they were reviving. One of the principles of Luther’s reform movement was *sola scriptura*, a Latin phrase meaning that the Bible should be the primary authority for Christians when they determine what they will believe and how they will live. Now, Luther is okay with bringing in secondary sources—creeds, personal experience, non-religious ideas or theories. And in fact, Luther is also okay with seeing some parts of the Bible as secondary: he had no problem with pushing certain things in Scripture to the side. At the end of the day, though, Luther believed that the Word of God here in this book should be our primary guide in

life—more so than popular ideas in the world, and more so than established teachings in the church.

That's what got Luther into trouble. He took the Bible, as he understood it, more seriously than he took the church's rules and norms. For example, the church in his day had developed a practice of selling indulgences, which means that if you paid money to the church, you could help a deceased loved one get into heaven sooner. But Luther saw no evidence for this practice in Scripture, and moreover, he saw evidence to the contrary. In the letter to the Ephesians and elsewhere in the Bible, we read that it is by God's grace alone that we are saved, and not by any human work or payment. So, Martin Luther opposed the church's practice of selling indulgences, and he did so by looking *back* to Scripture, trying to revive its authority, over and against the prevailing church traditions of his day.

Now, when it comes to Luther's views on Scripture, he wasn't just looking backward; he was also looking forward, also making change. In Luther's day, most people didn't have a Bible in their homes—which is fine, because most people couldn't read anyway. The printing press was a relatively recent invention, and precious few people could afford to own printed books. So, there would be a Bible in the church, and the priest would read it aloud during worship services, but besides that, people didn't really get to hear—much less read—the Scriptures. And furthermore, back in Luther's day, when the Bible was read in church, most people couldn't even understand large parts of it. That's because in Germany and most of Europe, all Bibles were written in Latin. The Bible in Latin was called the Vulgate, and it had been written, been translated into Latin, over one thousand years before then. But, over the course of those thousand years, most people stopped speaking Latin; Luther and his contemporaries spoke German, French, and other languages. And since only the educated elite ever studied Latin, only the educated elite could understand well what the Scriptures were saying.

For Luther, this was a problem. In addition to the principle of *sola scriptura*, Luther advocated for a principle called “the priesthood of all believers,” meaning that each and every Christian has direct access to God, through prayer and through their own heart. In other words, you don't need a priest, or a pastor, to get close to God. All of us can approach God directly. And if that's the case, Luther thought, then all of us should be able to approach Scripture directly. All of us have a right to understand, to the best of our ability, what God is saying to us through the Scriptures. So, what did Luther do? He translated the Bible—the *entire* Bible—into German. No one had ever done this before. Imagine that churches have been using the same Bible, hearing the same words in church from the same translation, for over *1,000* years. And all of a sudden, here comes this monk professor who says, “Nah. I think we should do it this way instead.” You can understand why so many people weren't fans of the Reformation movement. Lots of people didn't want to look forward... at least not in this way—breaking down hierarchies and evening the playing field.

But that, friends, is what Jesus calls us to. The Christian life always calls us both to look backward and to look forward; to honor our past and to adapt to the future; and to adapt in ever-more-just, ever-more-welcoming ways. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the

greatest?” Jesus answers, in our second reading, with a 2-for-1: 1) love God, *and*—apparently, just as important—2) love your neighbor. And according to the parable of the Good Samaritan, your neighbor isn’t just someone who lives close to you; your neighbor is anyone, including an enemy, who needs help. After naming these two commandments, Jesus says something fascinating: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Now, the phrase “law and the prophets” is short-hand for the whole Old Testament—which *was* Jesus’s Bible. So, he’s saying, “What holds all of Scripture together, what all of Scripture depends on, is this: love God and love others.”

Friends, let’s keep looking back to this truth. Let’s return to it and recover it again and again. At the same time, let’s keep looking forward, carrying this truth into the future in new ways. Let’s ask ourselves: How is God calling us to love God and to love others *today*? How can we love in ever-more-just, ever-more-welcoming ways? As we celebrate the Reformation, let’s keep in touch with God’s reforming spirit. Amen.