

The Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost

8 November 2006

The Chapel of the Cross
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

Deut. 6:1-9/Ps. 119:1-8, vs. 2/Heb. 9:11-14/Mark 12:28-34

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations. Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your name, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Well, we've made it through another election, and I for one am glad it's over. Not because I don't care about the political realities and challenges facing California or our nation, but because perhaps like many of you, I have grown weary of the polarizing rhetoric and self-justifying meanness that characterizes much of the political campaigning for public office these days. The hype and the "spin" coming from all sides in these last weeks leading up to the election, has seemed at many points to be nothing more than exercises in political self-justification and scapegoating, and I have grown weary, even annoyed by it all. Has political and religious discourse in the public sphere always been like this? I'd like to think not, however I suppose I am enough of a realist about human nature to recognize that the presence of self-righteous rhetoric in the public arena may be not all that new or somehow particular to our own day.

In the twelfth chapter of Mark, we find Jesus engaged in the public political and religious discourse of his own day. Early in the chapter Mark tells us that "they sent to Jesus some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said (vs. 13). Sound familiar as a strategy? Well, anyway... to set the trap, first there is a question for Jesus about income taxes. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" And next, a question about religious law. "If a woman marries seven brothers and has no children, who's wife will she be after the resurrection?" Jesus responds to each of these questions admirably, without falling into either the political or the religious trap that has been set for him. I imagine that many people were listening intently to this public debate, and Mark tells us that at least one person, the scribe in today's text, was positively impressed by what he had heard from Jesus so far. Seeing that Jesus had answered the first two questions well, the scribe asks a third, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Another trap? Maybe, but perhaps not. To me, it sounds more like two theologians, engaging in the "critical appropriation" of their religious heritage and tradition. Whatever the motive for the question, Jesus responds to the question flawlessly once again. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one; you shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” “The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” “There is no other commandment greater than these.” (vs. 29-31) To which the scribe responds, “You are right, Teacher.” (vs. 32)

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself. As Lutheran Christians, we resonate quite strongly with these words. We, who have been called to be leaders in the Lutheran tradition, know that love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable in our theology. Moreover, we have committed ourselves to this God of inseparable loves, and therefore are committed to embracing love of God and neighbor as the form and pattern for our own lives of discipleship. Not only are we familiar with, but we love Luther’s understanding of this inseparable connection, as he speaks about it in passages like the following:

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.¹

This unity between love of God and love of neighbor is a foundational part of our Lutheran theological understanding and we cherish it as a central piece of our Lutheran identity.

So, here’s a question. Why isn’t this way of life “catching on” in the public sphere today? Why is it, as Duane Priebe, a professor at Wartburg Seminary, observed recently, that in the 21st century it is still “all about righteousness” and not about loving God and our neighbors? I believe it is important for us, as theologians and leaders in the church, to grapple with this question, even if it makes us nervous or uncomfortable to ask it. By the grace of God, we ourselves have come to know that love of God and neighbor is God’s will for all human beings. What’s wrong with the rest of the world? Why don’t they know this? Why can’t they see it? Why aren’t they listening when we proclaim it in the public sphere? How does the commandment to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength become distorted by some into acts of violence and self-destruction in God’s name? Why is the commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves being drowned out in the public sphere by debates about appropriate levels of torture or the precise definition of genocide?

I find these sobering questions. I trust that you do too. And I also trust that you know that the answers to questions like the ones I have raised here are not going to be easy to hear, at least not initially. Why isn’t the way of life founded upon the twin calling to love God and neighbor catching

¹ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” *LW* 31:371.

on in the world? Sadly, we need look no further than ourselves in order to understand the heart of the problem. I think Duane Priebe is right, human beings – all of us – are still all about self-righteousness and self-justification as our preferred way of life in the 21st century. Much of the talk around our elections this year confirms this, I think. And it seems this has always been so. It's like peeling an onion – layer after layer of attempts to prove ourselves righteous as individuals and nations must be patiently peeled away by God's grace, and they often do not go quietly. And the layers just keep coming, no matter what. We are in real bondage to this way of life – as human individuals, as communities, and as nations. We cannot seem to free ourselves from the cycle of self-righteousness, whether individual or global. Even as those who want to obey the commandment to love God with all we are and have, we nevertheless find ourselves holding something back, just in case God can't be trusted to "come through for us." Even as those who are committed to loving our neighbors as ourselves, we hope we can find ways of doing this without risking our own future wellbeing too much. We are caught. All of us are.

So, the reason that the commandment that is "first of all" isn't "catching on" in the world is grounded, I think, in the all pervasiveness of human sinfulness which continually expresses itself in endless self-justification and all manner of what Luther speaks of as "false sainthood." The problem is sin – the problem is the human heart – hopelessly curved in upon itself in believer and non-believer alike. The recognition of this sobering reality is an important one, but it leaves another question in its wake.

As those who have been called to proclaim love of God and neighbor in the public sphere, what can we do to make our voices heard above the continual din of self-justification and scapegoating? If it is indeed true that all of us are caught in bondage to a way of life grounded in attempts at self-righteousness, what hope is there that the calling to love God and neighbor will ever be heard in the world? To answer these questions, we must return to the text for today. Remember that the scribe has found Jesus' answer to be just the right one – love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as you love yourself. The scribe agrees that this is the greatest commandment. Our text continues, "When Jesus saw that the scribe had answered wisely, he said to him, 'you are not far from the kingdom of God.'" (vs. 34) Wow! This isn't usually how the scribes are portrayed in the gospels – as close to the kingdom of God – is it? Jesus is making an important connection here between the love of God and neighbor and the nearness of God's kingdom in the world. "You are not far from the kingdom of God," Jesus says, "when you proclaim and practice love of God and love of neighbor." This connection, I think, is the key to

understanding just how our own proclamation of the commandment to love God and neighbor will come to be heard in the public sphere, in spite of the reality of a world still in bondage to self-justification. In our proclamation, God's kingdom will be near – in our practices God's own voice will be heard. Our words will be made effective by the power of God's kingdom coming near. It is, in the end, God, and not we ourselves, who speaks with the authority to cut through all the noise of self-righteousness. It is the power and presence of God's own kingdom that draws near whenever we proclaim love of God and neighbor in our preaching, teaching, and doing. God's kingdom draws near, with both the power and the will to call the whole world to this way of living. That which we cannot accomplish on our own – namely “making ourselves heard above the din” – God accomplishes for us and through us by drawing near himself and making himself heard – in, with, and under our proclamation. Our hope of proclaiming love of God and neighbor in the public sphere so that can be heard, therefore, rests in God's own promise that the kingdom draws near to us and to the world whenever we proclaim and practice it.

Where does the kingdom of God come near to you these days? Where will it come near to you today? I imagine that we might have a variety of answers to these questions. But I also suspect that we all share at least one answer in common. As those called to be leaders in the church, we know that God's kingdom draws near to us today in this meal we are about to share. This is my body, given for you, this is my blood, shed for you and for all – God's kingdom is not far from us or from our world in these words of promise. Here, today, right now, in bread and wine, God's kingdom draws near. Here, at the kingdom's table, we receive from God all that we need to speak love of God and neighbor into the public arena. Here at Christ's table, we pray that we will be strengthened through the gift of God's nearness in bread and wine both in our faith toward God and in our love of our neighbors. So come, eat, drink, and receive strength to proclaim love of God and neighbor into the world. In so doing, Jesus says, you, yourself are not far from the kingdom of God. Amen.