



**REFORMATION
OCTOBER 25, 2020
MATTHEW 22: 34-46
"GET BACK TO LOVIN"**

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?"

"The son of David," they replied.

He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, "'The Lord said to my Lord:

"Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet.'"

If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

SERMON

In 2008, the presidential election featured Barack Obama and John McCain. I was part-time pastor of a rural congregation in Illinois, where regularly I would include jokes in my sermons about republicans and democrats. It was equal opportunity fun. If I started out with a joke about the democrats, everyone knew a republican joke was soon on the way and vice versa. No one was ever offended.

I often aimed the jokes at a staunch republican member who remains a good friend to this day.

But times have changed. Leading up to the 2016 election and now in 2020, I have never once included a political joke in any sermon.



In the present climate, I suspect there would be people who would not see anything funny in joking about trump and Hillary or trump and Biden.
There is now no equal opportunity fun. I wouldn't dare....

Recall that in the late 1950s, the book "the ugly American" issued a scathing critique of America's bad behavior overseas.

Today, the ugly American has returned to our shores and has become even uglier.
Public discourse is now public coarseness.
Dialogue has become diatribe.
the common good has deteriorated into "my good."
Respectfully calling someone by name has turned into disrespectful name calling.

The poet, William Butler Yeats, with prophetic foresight, named the ill spirit of our time:
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Yes, the center has shattered. We experience the extremes at the edges—qanon, antifa, blood in the streets, the failure of leaders at all levels, and anger and rage as primary public emotions. On this reformation observance, perhaps we need to direct our attention to the matter of love summed up by Jesus: "love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself."

Elsewhere, the author of first john makes a simple, blunt, logical analysis of our professed love for God and our neighbor:
"if you do not love your brother and sister whom you can see, how can you love God whom you cannot see?"

So in the present social climate, what might love look like?

Let's start with the basics and reflect on the very notion of religion.

The most ancient meaning of religion is "to take into careful account." The opposite of neglect.

Look around. We are neglecting basic civility. Love at its most basic means allowing the other the right to just take up space on earth.



So what does it mean when a country founded by immigrants continually tells other immigrants to go back to where they came from? What does it mean when a nation of immigrants wants to keep people from coming to its shores?

Who we are at our very center has shattered into disconnected fragments.

And love of the neighbor that we can see seems to be in short supply.

If we actively work on leading a religious life with love at its core, we will take into careful account our thoughts, our feelings, our words, our understandings, and our actions. Our thoughts.

Psychologically, the skin is an artificial barrier. That is, we are deeply connected spiritually. Jesus says, "whatever you do to that other person, you do to me." Whatever judgment we make on another person is the judgment we make on ourselves and the measure by which we will be judged.

To be loving, we must do the spiritual work of re-training our minds. Take the example of judging others. It happens naturally: how another person looks, how another person acts, whether we like the person or not. Constantly needing to pull ourselves back to non-judgmental thinking.

Someone close to me had a psychotic break decades ago which led to criminal charges against him. I had the opportunity to ask a consulting psychiatrist what leads to a psychotic break.

Such a person, he said, starts out with a thought that is cut off from reality. And then another thought and then another thought. Each thought taking the person further away from collective reality until there is a final psychological break with reality. A break that takes the person into their own world of distorted and dangerous thoughts.

Today, there is a great deal of unrealistic and mentally suspect thoughts going around in this country. There is a neglect of positive, thoughtful, religiously sound thinking going on which does not serve us well, individually and collectively.

How are you doing with your inner thoughts?

Our feelings.

It is a fact we have feelings. Feelings are not facts.



The biblical perspective is that the heart is the center of the personality. And it is from the heart that come feelings that damage us and others.

It is a complex and difficult task to master our feelings.

The process includes being able to feel the feeling in the first place and then name the feeling and contain the feeling and make an informed decision about how to express that feeling in a way that does no damage. This is a great achievement for every person.

And we are not doing a good job in this country of taking our feelings into careful account.

Immaturity rules the day. In some circles, the greater damage we do with our feelings, the greater the psychological reward. In some circles, it seems to no longer matter that we use our feelings to hurt other people.

Just get over it, right?

Social media is a wasteland of people damaging others with their out-of-control feelings. How are you doing with your feelings?

Our words. For Lutherans, words are paramount. We take into careful account that the logos—the word of God—became flesh and walked among us.

Words en flesh our ideas, our thoughts, our inner life.

But what happens when our words no longer aim to express truth? What does it mean when our words are used to defame, bully, and demean one another?

Words that would get us sent to the principal's office in elementary school; bullying that would get us detentions in elementary school are becoming commonplace in our culture.

This means we are in deep trouble. It means we are being seriously neglectful. We are ignoring our basic religious task, which is to take into careful account how we use our words.

Above all else, the bible sees the devil as a liar. The devil desires to deceive. The devil misuses words to lead us astray.

We are in danger of losing the capacity to use our words in a productive manner....

Our understandings.



In the present social climate, it is dangerous to be a leader. It is hazardous to be an authority. It is risky to be an expert in some field of knowledge.

With social media, fake news from all sides, and propaganda machines all around us, how do we ever find out something close to the truth?

On November 4th, deb and I are getting a puppy. In preparation, I am reading a book by a dog training expert. If I follow the logic rampant in some corners of our country, I should be asking Michael Vick how to take care of our new puppy.

Someone help me understand. Why would we not listen to the scientists and public health officials about the pandemic?

Months ago they told us that the fall and winter would bring another wave of the virus. And what is happening?

In the last two weeks, there has been nearly a 19% jump in cases over the previous two weeks. In four of the last seven days there has been more than 60,000 cases reported—something that has not happened since the end of July.

An article in psychology today suggests that we are killing ourselves through our embrace and exaltation of ignorance.

“in a country where a sitting congressman told a crowd that evolution and the big band are ‘lies straight from the pit of hell,’ where the chairman of a senate environmental panel brought a snowball into the chamber as evidence that climate change is a hoax, where almost one in three citizens cannot name the vice-president, it is beyond dispute that critical thinking has been abandoned as a cultural value.”

And let’s add as evidence Joel Osteen, the country’s most popular preacher, who never spent a day in seminary.

Finally, our actions.

Our thoughts, our feelings, our words, our understanding all manifest in our actions. And the actions of many citizens today are downright ugly, mean, hate-filled, and violent.

Yes, the best lack all conviction and the worst are filled with passionate intensity.



Love issues in expansive thoughts, compassionate feelings, healing words, truthful understanding, and caring actions.

We each have a personal responsibility to see how far we are from these ideals and then get back to lovin'.

SERMON SONG

BACK TO LOVIN' (A.E. HONICK)