

Reformation Day, 2021

Jesus answered, “The first commandment is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord 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.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; loving God and loving the neighbor are much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Wonderfully encouraging and hopeful words, these. What God calls us to, the kind of relationship with us that God deeply, deeply desires, is one where we love God unreservedly, as God loves us, and we love our neighbors—that is, each and every one whom we encounter—the same way that God loves us, which to say, without hesitation--no exceptions.

Easy to say. Hard to do. As we realize every single day. So over the ages, good Christians and their good leaders have heard these words this way: *If you do all you can to love God and love your neighbor, you will be all right with God. That’s it: do your best.*

Now, I don’t know about you, but my inner perfectionist has just sighed deeply and relaxed. Do my best. Not be perfect in everything all the time. What a relief! What a blessing!

But wait a minute. How do I know I’ve done my best? Actually, I’m quite sure I didn’t. Not only did I think and say nasty things about that guy who cut me off in

traffic, I made, shall we say, quite a rude and visible gesture so everyone could see it. So much for love of neighbor. I am truly sorry and I humbly repent.

And I haven't thanked God yet for this beautiful day, and for the joy of being here—not with my whole heart. And I know I can afford to give more to the church, to volunteer at the shelter, to be kind to those who are in distress. So much for love of God. So much for love of neighbor. I am truly sorry, and I humbly repent, and I will do better. Because nothing matters more than being all right with God.

And yet—even if I do better, what about the things I could do but don't even know I could do, but I might do, if only I could figure out what they were? How can I ever be sure that I am doing all I can to love God and my neighbor? So how can I be sure that I'm all right with God? Not so relaxed now!

Something along these lines very much preoccupied a medieval monk named Martin Luther. He went to confession *all* the time, to confess what he knew he had done, and had not done; and to confess that he had neglected to confess some of what he had done or not done; and to confess that he didn't know all of what he needed to confess and so he hadn't confessed it. Until finally his confessor got fed up, told him to get over himself, and sent him away.

And Luther realized, all of a sudden, that being all right with God is up to *God*, it's not up to us. Luther realized that God always pours out abundant grace on all of us, all the time. God gives us grace to accept the grace that God pours out. And God gives us grace to share God's grace with others. What we do or don't do on our own—how often and how we pray, how much or how little we are gracious and loving and generous to others, even how often we do and do not give thanks to God for God's abundant grace—that's not what makes us all right with God.

We're already all right with God, because God has always and will always hold us close and enfold us in love.

God always, always, sees us as well-beloved daughters and sons. Always. No exceptions. God has promised that nothing can separate any of us from God. God always draws *us* close, even when we draw away. And God always makes it possible for us to receive God's love and to give God's love to others. We are saved by grace alone, as Luther said. God's grace. Always available, always on offer. Whether we deserve it or not.

Today is Reformation Day, a celebration and a remembering of Martin Luther's realization that it is grace alone that connects us to God. And it's a celebration and remembrance of Luther's working out what that means for being faithful and for being church. Yet in proclaiming the importance of grace and of our confidence, our trust, our faith in God, Luther wasn't doing anything new. After all, this conviction that God always offers God's love and goodness to us is something the Bible proclaims loud and clear, in both testaments. And it has been a central focus for a lot of theologians and a lot of priests and pastors and faithful people for centuries. What Luther did was *remind* Christians that God is gracious, all the time, and so it's not up to us to be good enough to merit God's love. God loves us freely. Regardless. No exceptions.

And we always seem to need that reminder because so much of our everyday lives is about doing the best we can, about being responsible grown-ups. We rely on each other, after all. It goes with being human. It goes with loving our neighbors, and loving God. It really matters that we show up and do what we can do. So it's easy, and maybe even reasonable, to extend that sense of needing to do well to our relationship with God, to the point of believing that our relationship with God actually hinges on *our* doing *our* best. Have we measured up? Have we done all

that God wants us to do? What's the balance on that spreadsheet that surely God keeps along with the ones we keep on ourselves and others?

But the *good* news is that our relationship with God rests with God, with God's endless goodness and not our own, with God's constant self-giving and love and not our own, with God's constant, abundant, and irresistible grace.

And believing that, *trusting* that sets us free. We don't have to worry about what God thinks of us, and what we do, and don't do. Because God always embraces us as well-beloved daughters and sons, regardless. No exceptions.

So when we turn toward God in love and thanksgiving, we are free to do so just because we love God, because receiving God's gracious love sparks love in us too. When we turn toward our neighbor in love—in compassion, in solidarity, in delight—we do so because receiving God's gracious love as God's deeply desired daughters and sons helps us see everyone we encounter as also deeply desired by God, and graced with God's love. When God's grace sets us free from worrying about where we stand with God, our love for God and for neighbor fills us and moves us to see others, to see the world, to see even ourselves as truly beloved of God. God's grace and love remake us, and remake the world.

Now all this can easily sound like so much pious twaddle. The truth of the matter is that loving freely is hard. Receiving God's grace is hard. Grace requires us to get over ourselves, to get ourselves out of the middle of the picture, and back into the company of others. Grace requires us, grace enables us to immerse ourselves in the whole mess of human existence, of life in the world, just as God does.

Grace opens us to holding close to our own hearts all the suffering, the cruelty, and the waste of the world, just as God holds all this close to God's own heart. And grace also opens us up to all the joy, all the warmth, all the wonder that intermixes

so completely with everything else, so that this messy world is also a world of delight.

So in a sense, grace strips us bare of our defenses. So it's hardly surprising that we often prefer to step back and just get on with it by doing the best we can. The thing is, though, that grace ultimately doesn't let us do that. It's always there. It's always beckoning us, luring us, drawing us closer to God. And closer to each other. Grace keeps opening our eyes to the fact that love of God and love of neighbor are more important than all the offerings, all the efforts, all the sacrifices we make. And so we are never far from the kingdom of God.