

Willow River Parish

Title: Love, Love, and Love

Scripture Reading: Matthew 22:23-46

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴² “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” ⁴³ He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

⁴⁴ ‘The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet”’?

⁴⁵ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” ⁴⁶ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Have you ever heard the word, ‘indulgence’? It is a symbolic word that shows that 16th century European Catholic churches were corrupt. According to the dictionary, “An indulgence was a way to reduce the amount of punishment one has to undergo for sins.” At that time, people believed that there is a purgatory between hell and heaven. Purgatory is an intermediate place people go after physical death for expiatory purification. No one can escape death. Everyone wanted to go to heaven, but it was hard

to be sure that anyone received salvation because they thought heaven was only for those like Jesus. The medieval churches were powerful enough to dismiss the Roman Emperor. Historically, powerful forces caused corruption. The churches enjoyed luxury and pleasure and needed a lot of money to maintain their lives, so they traded on people's anxiety coming from the issue of salvation and anxiety to sell people indulgences. Like that: "Do you want to be clean from sin? Then, buy indulgences." Through this method, medieval churches were able to make a lot of money.

There were also other things that led to the corruption of the churches. The Black Death also known as the plague, which began in the middle of the 14th century, killed many Europeans. The disease killed ordinary people and priests. When several priests died of the disease, the churches needed them, so the churches began to sell ordinations. The church's authority declined as more and more unqualified people become priests with money. Those who were unqualified but became priests with money caused a lot of problems. Priests had to observe celibacy, but they enjoyed a sexually promiscuous life, though they did not get married.

Although the churches had the power to serve the world, their lives were far from what the Bible calls "love."

Even in the days when Jesus lived, churches and religious leaders always had problems. They observed the law, but there was no love in their lives. Religious leaders had a lot of knowledge, but they did not practice it as a life. In the chapter 10 of the Gospel of Luke (NRSV), a teacher of the law asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" (29) Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." (30-32)

The teachers of the law believed that they could be saved through the law, and had a lot of knowledge, but they did not know the essence of the Gospel. They did not realize the truth of God beyond the law. When Jesus asked the

Pharisees, “What do you think about Messiah? Whose son is he?” they answered, “The son of David.” It is a human thought that Christ is a descendant of David. Jesus taught them that Christ goes beyond our thoughts and intelligence. The life and teachings of Jesus were different from those of the Pharisees. Therefore, they felt uncomfortable when they saw Jesus with the marginalized such as the sick and the poor. And when they faced Jesus who was better than them, they had feelings of envy and hatred against him. Their loveless lives eventually led to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Beloved, can indulgence save human? Can the law save human? How do we get saved? Where do we receive salvation?// The Bible tells us that we can be saved through Jesus Christ. John 3:16 (NRSV) says that “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” God loves us and opened the way for salvation through Jesus Christ. When we believe in and embrace the fact, we can walk the way of salvation.

Let’s return to the story of medieval churches. As the depravity and corruption of medieval churches grew worse, most people began to recognize the fall of the church. However, people could not stand up to the powerful church because resistance to the church meant death. They thought that to stand up to the church is banging one’s head against a wall. Then, on October 31, 1517, a priest named Martin Luther posted the “Ninety-Five Theses” to the Wittenberg church based on the arguments: “Only Faith, Only Grace, and Only Bible.” His theses and efforts influenced many people. His Ninety-Five Theses spread out and many agreed with his arguments. Religious reformation spread from Germany to England and to Switzerland, and to whole Europe and all over the world.

Luther also translated the Bible into German. At that time, the Bible was written only in Latin and priests preached in Latin, so the public could not read and understand God’s message. The medieval churches considered the Bible translation as profanation, but Luther translated it for the people. Through his efforts, people were able to become to read the Bible and learn

more about God. Biblical translation has been translated into not only German, but also French, Spanish, English, Korean, and so on. That is why we can read the Bible in English today. The practice of love by Martin Luther, who loved God and loved his neighbors, had a great influence on reforming the churches. Like this, the power of love is amazing.

In the Gospel reading we read today, a teacher of the law asked Jesus a question to test him. (35) “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (36) Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (37) This is the greatest and first commandment. (38) And a second is like it; “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (39) Through his words, we can know the essence of faith is the relationship with God and neighbors.

Beloved, do you have joy in your hearts? Are you happy now? Do you have love in your minds? How about having a time to check our hearts, minds, and souls for the relationship with God and our neighbors? We must remember that it is the essence of our faith to love our God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. For this week, I pray in the name of the Lord that we love our God and love our neighbors as ourselves with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds. Amen.