

**Reformation and  
Season after Pentecost [Proper 26B]**

October 31, 2021

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: John 8: 31-36; Mark 12: 28-34

*I give credit with much gratitude to Father Michael Renninger for this sermon<sup>1</sup>.  
After the first two paragraphs, I'm embarrassed to say I cannot fully separate his words  
and mine to give him full credit for direct quotes.*

*“Grace to you and peace from God –Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen”*

The last time this lesson came up in the order of readings, that we call the lectionary, was November 4, 2018, the Sunday before some very high profile congressional elections during the administration of President Trump. Father Michael Renninger, priest at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Richmond, Virginia found himself barraged by voice and e-mails, that were telling him what he should be preaching if he was “truly” a Christian preacher and who he should be telling his congregation members to choose in the upcoming election if he really was a man of God. The messages were from people of both political parties. The messages were aligned with opposing points of view. All the speakers were equally vehement. The messages were most often the exact talking points of the very different networks and media personalities and rarely cited a gospel. What most alarmed Father Renninger was the deep anger that was evident in the speaker's voice and message. How angry people were with those who dared to have a different political opinion than their own. How willingly and angrily they condemned their neighbors, Father Renninger says, who are, after all is said and done, children of God. Decisions made in anger rarely are our best. What is it that Jesus requires of us when we make choices, whether it's in a voting booth, our homes or when we are out and about? What does Jesus require of us when we make choices?

Into that anger that is so clearly with us still today, comes this same gospel lesson about what it means to love God. Before today's reading in Mark, Jesus had also been barraged. Not by voice and email messages, but by the chief priests, scribes, elders and Pharisees. They were trying to prove he was not faithful to the Hebrew scriptures or traditions. They are trying to trap him in a heresy, a false teaching, by which they could dismiss him. Whether they purport to be protecting their faith, the tradition or their own positions, they appear to be angry and threatened by this Jesus of Nazareth. *Except*, this one scribe. He has observed all this squabbling and sees Jesus has responded well. He seems to want to cut to the chase. Get to the essentials. “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first 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 are no other commandments great than these.”

Jesus first quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, a quotation that is also the beginning of the Shema, a prayer prayed by devout Jews each morning and evening. It takes us back to Moses presenting God’s Words, the commandments, to the newly freed Hebrew slaves. Directives from the God who had just rescued them. In essence, Moses was saying to the people, “choose,” choose who you will love and who you will serve. Will we serve the living God or false gods? Will we choose to serve this challenging, loving God who has brought us out to freedom or golden calves? “Will we serve gods made in our image and likeness or will we serve the God who has set us free, whose decrees are the words of everlasting life. In effect Moses was saying to the people, you have to choose. You have to choose to make the Lord your God the center of your life. You have to choose to love the Lord your God with all you heart, mind and soul. The Lord alone deserves your choice, the Lord alone deserves your love.”<sup>2</sup> And why did they choose, why would we choose to love and serve this God alone? Because, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have come to know that God first loved us and has never stopped loving us. This is the heart of the gospel that Martin Luther needed to learn for himself. And once he did encounter this God who loved us so fiercely and forever, he wanted all people to know it, too.

We aren’t the only ones who make choices. God has made choices, too. God’s love is made clear as God chooses to provide daily care. “God loves God’s people enough to choose to speak the truth through prophets. God loves us enough [to choose] to calls us to a holy [and rich] life of integrity through God’s moral law. God’s love, at times, can seem like a harsh and dreadful thing because to be loved by God means we will [be lead] to know ourselves truthfully and look at ourselves honestly.”<sup>3</sup> God’s love is most perfectly revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Who will you, who will I choose to love and serve?

In the gospel, his teaching and life, Jesus also asks us to choose. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. AND, he adds, love your neighbor as yourself. Loving God and loving our neighbors are forever connected. Love God. Love your neighbor. ALL our neighbors. Even those who have a different political opinion, post annoying messages on Facebook, accept or refuse the COVID vaccine or are different from us. We must choose to love them, Jesus says, we don’t get to pick and choose. We’re to love them all. To be able to choose to love all our neighbors, well that kind of love takes a lifetime of training .... a lifetime of choosing to receive God’s wisdom and love in

God's Word, Meal and community... a lifetime of choosing to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the way God loves us and everyone — first, fully and forever. As we learn and try to love God with all energy and honesty, we learn to let God be a part of every decision we make throughout every day. As we love God more fully, we begin to have the eyes to see how we have chosen other gods of our own making and priorities that are not life-giving. This is the truth Martin Luther was trying to help his church and leaders understand, so the church could make choices that would put the written gospel and the love of God for God's children before the church's traditions, power, finances and hierarchy.

Another wise sage, Professor Dumbledore, from the Harry Potter series once told Harry – It is not our abilities that make us who we are but our choices. If we would apply that to God, who then is God? God is the Lord who eternally chooses to love us and care for us and speak the truth to us that can set us free. It seems to be the very nature of God, so clearly revealed in Jesus, to love us and be there for us and call us toward being more fully alive and loving. “We know God by the choice God makes each day to love you more than you can ever know.”<sup>4</sup> What makes you and I who we are? It's not just our family of origin, educational background, political party, financial standing or even your church membership. Your choices shape who you are and who you are becoming. Choices made each and every day. And, you don't need me to tell you what to choose. Jesus has already done that. He said, love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Choose to follow the One who chooses you for all eternity. Choose to follow Christ who reveals God's boundless love. Choose to love your neighbor as yourself. When you make these choices, Jesus says, you are not far from that blessed kingdom of God. Amen.

## ENDNOTES

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1. To hear *Father Michael Renninger's sermon*, go to <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/b50-2-the-twenty-fourth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-b-2018/>
  2. Michael Renninger, “Sermon for the Twenty-fourth Sunday of Pentecost,” November 4, 2018
  3. Ibid
  4. Ibid