



Reformation Sunday, October 25, 2020

## **A Mighty Fortress: Love Made Tangible**

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles

*Psalm 1; Matthew 22:34-46*

Here is a famous moment in which Jesus gives them more than they were asking for. They wanted a one-commandment answer. He gives them two. The first one is all about God. The second one is all about neighbor. The two go hand-in-hand.

Pittsburgh Presbyterians have a corner on the concept of neighbor. We live in neighborhoods, not unlike the one that Presbyterian pastor Fred Rogers brought to the TV screen. He helped young children and their families realize we all are interconnected by love. Think of the introduction to his show. In the days before drones, he gave us first an aerial perspective. Then our focus became closer and deeper, right down to his own doorstep — making abstract concepts real; taking what we believe down to the personal level. There is neighborliness! Love your neighbor on the grand scale; the bird's eye view. Love people in general, but do not stop there. Focus in on the specific, the personal, which will allow people to receive the love you share.

Today being Reformation Sunday, I like to think back to the great reformers of 500 years ago. What were they attempting? To make the Church of their day as much like the Church in the first century AD as possible. So that the Church for their children and their children's children would be closer to the ideal of the churches founded by the first apostles. It called for the whole community to live according to the way of Jesus. Every church that honors the spirit of the Reformation still strives to do exactly that.

If you were to go to Geneva to see what is there, one of the famous sights is that sculpture of the Reformers. There they are, larger than life, carved in stone, standing tall. At the center of the monument, four larger statues of Calvinism's main proponents are depicted: William Farel (1489-1565), John Calvin (1509-1564), Theodore Beza (1519-1605), and John Knox (ca. 1513-1572). To the left are slightly smaller statues of Frederick William of Brandenburg (1620-1688), William the Silent (1533-1584), and Gaspard de Coligny (1519-1572). To the right are similarly sized statues of Roger Williams (1603-1683), Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), and Stephen Bocskai (1557-1606). I would like to think that, if those Reformers were to step down from that wall, and make their way to our church on Reformation Sunday, they would approve of what they find. Maybe they would even have some words to say on this occasion. (Although I suppose that William the Silent would have nothing to say.)

And what of that other, most famous Reformer? Martin Luther might like to know that we still sing his song, "A Mighty Fortress," on Reformation Sunday. At the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary 200<sup>th</sup> commencement in 1994, Fred Rogers was the commencement speaker. He took as his focus for the sermon a line from Martin Luther's Reformation hymn, and he told of a conversation he once had with his beloved professor, Dr. William Orr, at the nursing home. Fred and his wife Joanne went there, every Sunday after worship, to visit Dr. Orr.

That Sunday's worship had concluded with Luther's famous Reformation hymn. One verse had caught Fred's attention:

*"The prince of darkness grim,  
We tremble not for him,  
His rage we can endure,  
For lo, his doom is sure;  
One little word shall fell him."*

Fred Rogers asked Dr. Orr what was that one little word, which could defeat the prince of darkness? Dr. Orr responded, "There is only one thing evil cannot stand and that is forgiveness." We might say that forgiveness is an example of love made tangible.

It is also fair for us to say that love is made tangible when we give to our church. To forgive. To give. Our pledges are a real commitment to care for our congregation, and our neighbors near and far. How blessed we are on this Stewardship Commitment Sunday that you are making your faith real, your hope focused, your love tangible, as you let the church know what you will contribute in the year ahead. With your generous and prayerful gifts, the heart you have for our Lord will reach far, and encourage many, and honor God. As we move from 2020 into 2021, we have heartfelt hopes and dreams that what lies ahead will help us to serve Christ even more effectively — through new ways of being the church, as well as traditional ones. In order to make that happen, each one of your gifts is requested, and every one of them is appreciated. To forgive. To give. Love made tangible.

How do we experience love made tangible from God? We find it in our very lives. God created us in love. God called us God's own, in love. God provided us a way when there seemed to be no way, in love. God sent messengers of hope and guidance to us — in the prophets of the Old Testament, and in the leaders of the Early Church — out of love. God came to us in love, in the person of Jesus Christ. God showed us the extent of divine love, as we looked at Christ, the Messiah; as we listened to His teaching; as we grew through His wisdom; as people were called and claimed, forgiven, set free and made whole, given hope and a new beginning. God sealed that love for us in Jesus, by giving His life, for ours, in enduring the cross and the grave, on our behalf; in undoing the finality of death; and in opening to us the way everlasting. How can we say thank you? How can we show our gratitude for God's great love for us?

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”*

And what about our neighbors? *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

In 2020, we have learned that our neighbors are both near us and far away. We have learned that our neighbors long for us to know that their lives matter. We have learned that neighbors are not yet able to live in ways that God intends, where they can be whole and well. We have learned in this far-from-ordinary year that love can extend as far as our gifts and our technology will allow. We have learned that sharing in a worthy cause and giving to bring relief are just as important as ever.

At some point this past year, as I was returning to Pittsburgh by air, the pilot gave me a special gift. On our approach to Pittsburgh International Airport, we flew directly over our neighborhood. I looked out the plane window and saw Fifth Avenue and Ellsworth Avenue, and Amberson Avenue and Westminster Place. I saw our church building and grounds. And then, something even better happened. Here and there beside the church, I saw some cars, which I recognized as belonging to some of you. It made me think of you, and that made me very, very glad — because it moved me from the general idea of neighbor, to the specific. To you. To the love you share.

I invite you to keep on doing that: focusing in on the specific, the personal, so others will continue to receive the love you have to give. As you do, you will make what Jesus says about the greatest commandment real — today, and all the days to come. Amen.