

October 31, 2021 – Mark 12:28-34 (Reformation/All Saints)

It's a mixed up day today. Reformation Sunday is usually slotted into the church calendar for the last Sunday in October. All Saints Day comes on November 1st every year. And Halloween on our secular calendar is scheduled for tonight. I've chosen to use today's assigned scripture reading from the Gospel of Mark to address both Reformation Sunday and All Saints Day in this week's sermon. I'll touch on Halloween as well.

The Gospel reading is focused on two teachings that Jesus says this about: "There is no other commandment greater than these." He is referring to the commandments: "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." and, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Every year, on this Sunday when we remember those people who are part of our congregation who have died in the past year since the last All Saints Sunday, we will include their names in the service, giving their loved ones the opportunity to remember them and give thanks for their lives. There are several people in the three congregations who we will remember this year and we will name them during our in-person worship services and reflect on the impact they have had on us at that time. But here, on our public website, I will respect their privacy and say only that they were all loved deeply and are missed by their families, friends and church communities.

First, a bit of history on Halloween – The Halloween tradition began with the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced Sow-in), when people would light bonfires and wear costumes to scare off ghosts. In the eighth century, Pope Gregory III designated November 1st as a time to honor all saints. Soon, All Saints Day incorporated some of the traditions of Samhain. The evening before was known as All Hallows Eve, and later Halloween. Over time, Halloween evolved into our current day practices of trick-or-treating, carving jack-o-lanterns, festive gatherings, donning costumes and eating treats. Like many other Christian festivals, All Saints has some of its origins in pre-Christian practices and beliefs.

As for Reformation Sunday, it began in the 16th century when the Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther, protested against what he perceived to be abuses by the church hierarchy against the church members, especially that of selling indulgences. In 1517, Luther is said to have posted 95 theses or points he wanted to discuss and argue against, but the church powers weren't interested in Luther's point of view and attempted to have him arrested. It is said that Luther chose to post his list of grievances on October 31st on the church door at Wittenberg because he knew the church would be packed the next day for All Saints Sunday. The final result was what we today call the Reformation as various Roman Catholic priests broke away from the Roman Catholic Church as they protested certain practices of the church. This is why the Lutheran church and other churches of the time that came out of the Reformation are known as Protestants.

So, with that bit of history before us, how might what Jesus claims are the two most important commandments for all people for all time have to do with the Reformation and All Saints Sunday? How does loving God and loving one's neighbours speak to the decision by many Christians of the 16th century to speak out against certain church practices of their time? Do these same commandments have relevance for Christians today? My answer is a definite, "Yes!"

Reformation Day in Protestant churches should not be about making any claims that they are better than Roman Catholic churches. This day is not about celebrating a division of the church some 500 years ago. This day should be about reminding all Christians that everything they do, every decision they make, every practice they follow, every teaching they promote, and every word they speak and action they take should be done in a spirit of love for God and for their neighbours or for one another.

I think we can all agree on this, but the challenge before Christians in the 16th century and the challenge before Christians now is knowing what love is in any situation and what we should do and not do to make sure we are acting with love. For instance, in this time of pandemic there are a large majority of people here in Canada who have chosen to be vaccinated. There are also a smaller minority of Canadians who have chosen not to be vaccinated. I'm not here to argue who is right and who is not, but to consider that people in both groups, those for vaccination and those against vaccination, believe that the choice they are making is the most loving choice they can make. Most of those people being vaccinated consider their decision to have a vaccine a loving choice that will protect not only themselves but other people as well as they build up an immunity to the virus. Many of those not being vaccinated consider their decision to not have a vaccine a loving choice because they are speaking out and taking a stand against what they perceive to be something that is harmful to them and to others. Unfortunately, the choice to have or not have a vaccine is dividing people, families, communities, neighbours, and friends. In some ways, this issue is similar to the issues that brought about the Reformation in the church.

The leaders of the Roman Catholic Church and the leaders of the Reformation movement would not sit down and discuss the important items they disagreed about in a manner that promoted understanding, empathy, and a solution that was acceptable for both groups. The result was a Reformation movement that led to hostility, violence, bloodshed, and death to Christians on both sides of the issues. This is what happens when love of God and love of one another takes a back seat to what some people consider to be bigger issues. Looking back on it now, 500 years later, people can still get riled up about such issues but I think we know now that they should never have become so big that they led to something that was definitely a lack of love being shown to one another.

How sad it is that people have so often let issues divide them instead of sitting down and listening to one another's beliefs, concerns, thoughts, and fears. So often it is fear that drives people to say things and take actions that do harm to others, and in the process, harm to themselves. The Roman Catholic Church was afraid of what would happen to their church and the people who were part of it if this Reformation movement took hold, so they tried to stop it in its tracks. However, this method usually just builds up resentment and more determination by those attempting to make reforms to carry on. This is certainly what occurred in the time of the Reformation and it affected negatively millions of Christians.

I wonder if those people who are so adamant about forcing people to get vaccines or making it very difficult for them to function in society without a vaccine realize that it might be fear rather than love that is driving their decision to impose their will on others? Is it possible that they want everyone to be vaccinated because they are afraid that if there is not a requirement for full vaccination for everyone this virus will never go away and we will all suffer longer than we need to?

I wonder if those people who are so adamant about not getting vaccines and so upset about not being able to go out and about with their daily activities as those vaccinated can might realize that it could be fear rather than love that is driving their decision? Are they so afraid of the vaccine and what it might do to them that they would rather risk putting others in danger or cause them to live in fear of the virus instead of taking a risk that might only affect them?

Again, I need to emphasize that I don't want this sermon to become about who is right and who is wrong in the choice to be vaccinated or not but to be about understanding that loving God and loving one another means putting our fears about our own welfare and safety aside or at the very least not making them more important than the welfare and safety of other people. That's what love is and that's what love requires of us. Not only in regards to this virus and vaccinations but in all situations when we are not sure what to do and when we do not agree with others. I chose to use the issue of vaccines because of the large protest by those opposing vaccines gathered together last Sunday just a block from where I live. In some ways, this protest is little different than those protesting certain church practices in the 16th century. Both sides appear to be sure that they are right and the other is wrong. Both groups seem unwilling or unable to listen to each other in a manner that respects the others beliefs.

I could have chosen many other issues to illustrate my point. How many battles and wars have been fought by one group of people protesting the actions of another group because they have focused on fear of one another instead of love for one another? How many families have broken up because family members have been hurt by each other and they have let this lead to a lack of trust for each other? Mistrust is always the result of fear. Only a love for each other can break that fear and lack of trust. How many political campaigns are now run on

