St James United Church



Message for October 25, 2026
Reformation Sunday

“The Reformation of Our Hearts” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Leviticus 19:1-18; Matthew 22:34-46; concluding paragraphs of Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*

Each year on Reformation Sunday, I’m tempted to preach on the tenets that give Protestantism its shape, like that we are saved by faith alone. But this year I thought about how Martin Luther and other Reformers came to that belief among others by first turning to the bible where they dialogued with the Jesus, along with the apostles, that they met there. It’s appropriate then that today we meet Jesus engaged in a dialogue of his own, speaking with leaders of his faith tradition, offering some correctives, as the Reformers would do with church leaders in their time.

I emphasize the word correctives because we often act like Jesus taught something completely new, breaking with the Jewish tradition. Instead, he too was seeking reform. As we read in the gospel this morning, he was steeped in his people’s scriptures, even drew on the views of rabbis before him. Consider this about Hillel, a Pharisee a hundred years before him. He was famously asked to recite the Torah while standing on one leg. He did, saying, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary.” Jesus’ linking of the command they expected him to say, “you shall love God with all your heart, soul and mind” with a second, to “love your neighbour as yourself” wasn’t that different from Hillel.

So why is Jesus getting into difficulty as some Pharisees come to test him a second time? Well just as there isn’t just one Christian denomination, in Jesus’ time there were different religious groups like the Sadducees, Essenes and Pharisees, with subgroups too. The most prominent group within the Pharisees didn’t follow the lenient Torah interpretations of Hillel. They based their approach on his contemporary, on Shammai, whose interpretations were stricter, more focused on ritual purity. These are the same group that Jesus earlier accused of using a Torah loophole so they didn’t have to help their parents and would later accuse of being more concerned with tithing herbs than showing mercy. This may be why he changed the words in Deut. 6 from loving God with all our might to all our mind. They seemed to delight in using their intellect to devise rules that showed their devotion to God but not how to help others.

Their focus on holiness over helping points to a tension between different Protestant churches - the role of good works in our spiritual lives. At first, concern over “works righteousness” seems misplaced given how Jesus linked loving our neighbours with loving God. But loving our neighbours suggests we need to put ourselves into Martin Luther’s shoes. He was burdened by guilt, worried he hadn’t done enough to prove his devotion to God. Working that through was why he studied the bible in the first place, and there, especially in Romans, he found solace, coming

to believe we're saved not by what we do for God, but by what God did for us in Christ. All we need is to trust in God's love for us, the love we have for God flowing from their love.

So, what then of loving neighbours as ourselves? It is still essential. It's just that we do it because of God's love for us, not to earn that love. As the end of Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian* makes clear, we help others because God first helped us. Failing to give aid in their struggles or to resolve the reasons for those struggles, is proof that we have no real faith, grace not reforming our hearts and lives. I'd like to read that to our siblings in faith who justify laws that hurt one marginalized group or another with appeals to bible verses. Again, if loving God and neighbour are linked, then faith in Jesus is more than reciting a prayer to invite him into our hearts. We experience him taking hold of our heart, then show compassion for the most vulnerable, especially as we realize that the quote from Leviticus about loving neighbour is from a section of commands that instructed farmers to leave grain in the field for others, including aliens, aka migrants, and for employers to treat workers fairly. Loving neighbours as ourselves isn't conditional, a love them only as much as ourselves rule but a call to see them as ourselves, not them versus us but them and us part of one loving whole.

As I share this, I don't want to come across as judging the denominations that emphasize personal conversion. After all, much of that comes from Methodism, a big part of our identity as United Church. John Wesley, who helped shaped Methodism, wrote of a pivotal spiritual moment when his "heart was strangely warmed" while listening to a treatise of Luther and he shifted from an intellectual assent of belief to a deep trust in Christ's love. His experience reminds us that Jesus put loving God and loving neighbour together, so that one feeds into the other. I need to keep on turning to God, trusting that in time I am growing in holiness. The Pharisees desire to do just that wasn't wrong. But it can't stop there. Which is what we see in Wesley as he dedicated his life to preaching the gospel in action as well as word, advocating for prison reform, abolishing slavery, care for the working poor, among other causes. His conversion moment points to the role that a personal relationship with Jesus plays in our lives, but it is not only about that relationship. It's like the role of coming to worship. It is wonderful when we hear our favourite hymn or the sermon hits home, but when it doesn't connect for me it may for someone else, and in the end it's about coming together not just to be lifted up personally but lifted to be sent into our neighbourhood to love as Jesus did.

In the end it is about balance. If we focus on God and ignore our neighbour, we show that our assent in faith was only of the mind, not the heart. But if we focus on our neighbour and forget to nurture our relationship with God, the well of love we had for them can run dry. A key mantra of Protestantism is being "reformed and always reforming." We keep reforming by returning to the scriptures repeatedly like the first reformers, listening with our hearts to what Jesus said and did. Then as the Spirit changes our hearts both personally and collectively, we are called into the world to love our neighbour in concrete ways. So, let's follow the lead of Luther and other reformers who went to the scriptures to meet Jesus and let him lead them. As we do the same, we too will meet Jesus who will reform our hearts to love others. Amen.