18th Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1966

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 22: 34-40 But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, to test Him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And 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. This is the great and first commendment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

GOD'S DESIGN FOR MAN

Imagine, if you can, that there is no Gospel. Imagine that there is no grace of God in Christ, no Word of forgiveness, and mercy, and redemption. Imagi that this is the only thing we had - the is word of the law and the prophets, descending upon us like a thunder-clap. You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Our first reaction as human beings, as the children of Adam and Eve, is to want to compromise the severity of what these words are saying - to squirm and wheedle our way around it - to make excuses and alibis. We like to think, for example, (and especially is this true in our age) that God is a loving, merciful God and that He could not possibly carry out His threats, He could not possibly damn anyone or send anybody to hell.

With this kind of easy, nonchalant philosophical approach to God, we find it easy to change the wording of the text. We say, for instance: You should love the Lord your God; You should love your neighbor - implying that wherever this is impossibl or inconvenient a good and gracious God will overlook it. In other words, Just do the best you can. Or we take a negative, passive approach. We say, I have never deliberately, actively hated God or my neighbor. Maybe some of you men know what I am talking about. (I can only speak from an man's vantage point.) I say to my wife, I love you. There has been nothing in our relationship that has been deliberately or purposefully destructive. But she says to me, What I want is not a declaration, but a demonstration. You say you love me, but why don't you share your heart, your soul, the experience of your life with me? Why don't you share your hopes, your dreams, your aspirations, your fears. Otherwise, I feel like I were little more than a housekeeper, a piece of furniture, something merely to be used around the house....

So it is with our relationship to God. We are quick to say, I have neve

consciously hated God. I don't ever remember having a hateful thought toward Go I have never climbed to the top of a hill and shaken my fist at God and shouted blasphemous things at the sky. I don't hate God - I don't even think about Him. But this is precisely the point. This kind of relationship is negative, passive it counts for nothing. Who of us could ever say that God has actively come first, last, and in-between in our lives - everything we do and so - all of our thoughts, drea and aspirations?

And the same thing is true when it comes to our relationship to our neighbor. I cannot even really, honestly say that I love my wife and my children as I love myself. Most often I am selfishly seeking ways in which I can use them for my own self-bent advantage. I shout out orders to my children: Do this for daddy do that for daddy, don't do that - and all the while I am trying to fit them into a pre-conceived straight-jacket that will most benefit my own interest. Or I yel at them in a rage while I am trying to watch the news before supper - You kids be quiet while the news is on - and I seldom take into consideration that they are people too with feelings and emotions the same as I have. How can I ever say tha I love them as I love myself? And even the occasional great, good, kind acts I exhibit toward my wife are seldomly, if ever, done without some selfish and ulterior motive lurking somewhere behind the scenes. And when it comes to the rest of the world - well, here I certainly fall flat on my face. Here the old addage applies: Out of sight, out of mind. I can't ever remember spending a sleep less night in my concern for the thousands upon thousands of hungry, needy, suffer ing people in the world. I have enough to worry about without earnestly or personally taking their burdens and problems to my heart. So I simply wipe them out of my prayers and my concerns. I don't hate them - I just don't think about them. And yet the commandment says, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Do you begin to see, then, why it is that Jesus directed these Pharisees to the one crucial and ultimate question: What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is He? They were legalists; they wanted to live by the Law; they wanted to stand before God on the basis of their performance. If you want any life that way

Jesus said in effect, you will have to keep it to the hilt - heart, soul, and mind for God, and your neighbor as yourself. Unless we meet God's expectations all the way, we do not meet them at all. The word is all - all your heart, soul, and mind. Those who quote the Great Commandment as being the sum total of their religion will have to take their stand there. If they don't live up, they don't live. There is no other alternative. And then there is nothing left but God's judgment and condemnation. The great God doesn't fool around here. The God who negates really negates. His anger waxes hot. In all the smoking fury of His wrath He pronounces His verdict: The soul that sinneth, it shall die... The wages of sin is death.... Cursed - Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things that are written in the Book of the Law to do them....Depart from Me, ye workers of iniquity....To hell with you! And He means it!

There is only one way out. That way out is not the Law, but the Gospel. What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is He? He is David's son, but He is at the same time David's Lord. It was this Lord, the Savior, that David held up against the wrath of God in the midst of his sin, his adultery and murder - and then he could pray, If Thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand; but there is forgiveness with Thee. The only way I can stand up to the Law without being done in by its accusations is if I have a Go-Between like a sponge that stands between me and the accuser and absorbs the accusation - suffers its accusation, suffers it out of existence for me. And I do have that in Jesus Christ - the One Mediator between God and man who is always my Mediator. The Law doesn't cease to accuse me, but now I can say with St. Paul: Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? I can say this because it is Christ who justifies.... God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

So now when the Law comes through to me with all of its many and varied accusations, I say, That's right, I deserve that kind of accusation. But now, as a man in Christ, I can turn these accusations off. Luther used to engage in these kind of dialogues, and he would say, O.K., that's enough out of you now. And it

was immaterial whether he called that other party by the name of Law, Wrath of God, devil, or satan (accuser) - the conversations always ran the same. One of my favorite dialogues goes something like this. Luther says, It will happen like this sometimes that you cannot go to sleep at night. And the reason you can't go to sleep is because the devil is at your bedside rehearsing to you all the things you did wrong, or all the things that you failed to do during the course of the day just past. There he is with his accusations - he is God's accuser - he is Satanus. (In the Scriptures the devil is certainly not the imp with long horns that we picture him to be in our cartoons.) Finally, says Luther, what you must do is get up on one elbow and turn to him and use sarcasm if necessary, and you must say: 'O Prince Satan, I thank you for all this information. As a matter of fact (you must be very canny as you deal with him) - as a matter of fact, you have forgotten 3 or 4 sins which I shall now enumerate to you. Now this might put him off his guard. But says Luther, To tell the truth that happens very rarely that you can outsmart him, because actually he has had 5 to 6 thousand years of experience with much greater heroes of faith than you - namely, Abraham, and Jacob, and David and the rest. But finally what you may have to do is to shame him, and you may say, 'The biggest reason for which I thank you for these accusations is that by the sheer force of your accusation you have driven me to remember what without your accusation I might well have forgotten before I went to sleep - and that is, you have reminded me of my only way out of those accusations - namely, my Lord Christ. I know you didn't intend that, but left-handedly I thank you none-the-less. And then you must lie down and go to sleep. Now that takes great faith!

But now the next morning when I get up to meet a new day, I cannot use this forgiveness, this freedom that I have found in Christ as an opportunity for lawlessness. The is perhaps the particular trap into which we Lutherans are inclined to fall. I think that because I can cast Jesus Christ into the teeth of the Law I can thumb my nose at it and do every blasted thing my flesh wants to do. Oh No! I am a free man, so free that because I can say with Christ on my side with His good gifts and Spirit, because I can say that there is now therefore no

condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus - because I can say this, I can als now say with the Psalmist: O Lord, how I have loved Thy Law. But now I look at t Law from a new vantage point. I look at it from the vantage point of having Chri at my side. It is still there, but it has lost its power to accuse and condemn me. It is still there, however, and it is still God's design for my life, and yo too. This is what the Scriptures call repentance - this daily starting all over again and in the power and strength of Christ to move forward - to listen again with a new ear to God's design for you: You shall love the Lord your God will all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Let it be so in Christ, your Savior - great David's greate Lord! Amen.