

October 29, 2017 – Journey worship

THEME: Tolerance

TEXT: Matthew 22:34–46

TITLE: The Power of Love

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

The Journey theme for the month of October, “Tolerance” hasn’t always lined up with what was preached each Sunday. Some sermons actually called for intolerance and if I recall correctly, Pastor Heather preached that we are called to move beyond tolerance to acceptance. The following Sunday, the sermon derived from Acts 16, spoke to Paul’s annoyance or intolerance of the enslaved young woman continually following him and Silas proclaiming the truth, that they were slaves of the most High God.

Change, both positive and negative sometimes comes about when people no longer willing to tolerate the status quo. Those who choose to say “enough is enough” are often the ones who affect change throughout history. The end of slavery, granting of citizenship to Indigenous people; women, the Indigenous and Blacks earning the right to vote, the end of Jim Crow Laws, the institution of Civil Rights for all people, the end of Apartheid in South Africa were all realized when people refused to remain silent and go along to get along, stood up and spoke out. Some people gave their very lives because they could no longer tolerate the institutions and systems in they were forced to live.

There are many other historical markers of intolerance being the catalyst which brought about change throughout the world. Which brings us to today’s recognition and celebration of the 500th Year of the Reformation. If you will indulge me for a few moments, I’ll try to put to use what I learned in church history.

Some European theologians and scholars in the early 16th century and before began to question the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. It was also around that time, with the invention of the printing press, early translations of the Bible and the writings of Augustine became more widely available to everyone. Upon Augustine’s conversion to Christianity, he emphasized the primacy of the Bible, rather than church officials as the ultimate religious authority and he believed humans could not gain salvation by their own acts, that only God could bestow salvation by divine grace. On the other hand, the Catholic Church taught that salvation was possible only through “good works” and the purchase of indulgences.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, committed to the belief that salvation could only be reached through faith and by divine grace, as legend would have it, nailed a copy of his “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences,” also known as “The 95 Theses,” to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church. Luther’s 95 Theses became the foundation of the Protestant Reformation. It was a provocative, humble, academic, questioning document, and the first two of the 95 Theses contained Luther’s central ideas: “God intended believers to seek repentance and that faith alone, not deeds, led to salvation. Luther’s other 93 Theses, a number of them directly criticizing the Catholic Church’s practice of indulgences supported the first two.

Luther's tolerance was depleted so he called out the religious leadership that placed conditions on being in relationship with God. Luther realized that in and of our own strength and design it is impossible to please God. It is only through faith, faith in Christ Jesus, that we receive salvation, and because we have been so immeasurably blessed by God through Jesus Christ that we are moved to do good works as our response to God.

Not to equate Martin Luther with Jesus, but Jesus had grown weary and intolerant of those who were trying to trip him up by posing questions, which depending on his answers would either identify him as an enemy of government or not a true follower of God. Prior to today's passage, Jesus' interaction and conflict with the religious right of his day had reached crisis level. Jesus had turned tables over in the temple; proclaimed his purpose was to fulfill, not to abolish the law or the prophets. Jesus lamented over Jerusalem and foretold of the destruction of the Temple; he answered questions regarding paying taxes to Caesar and the resurrection, ultimately confounding the religious right of his day with his biblical knowledge and logic.

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together and one of them, a lawyer asked Jesus a question to test him. There's an old saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." A common enemy can unite even the most divergent of groups or factions. Case in point: traditional, conservative, Republican Party members who have aligned themselves with then nationalistic, populous Republicans to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act in their continuous attempt to destroy the legacy of President Obama and to enact even more tax breaks for the rich, the 1% among us and billion dollar companies, leaving the middle class and those with low/limited incomes to fend for themselves.

The Sadducees and Pharisees were both influential Jewish sects. The Pharisees were keepers of the Mosaic Law and believed the entire Hebrew Bible to be the word of God. They used the law to create structures to keep the formerly exiled people of God from replicating the behavior that resulted in their previous exile, to remain in right relationship with God and to exclude others who weren't of Jewish descent. The Pharisees were more concerned with keeping the Law, than the condition of people's hearts. While the more affluent Sadducees also held the Mosaic Law as authoritative, they were sympathetic to the Hellenistic movement, and acquiesced to the influence of Greek and Roman powers, as it was economically and politically advantageous for them to do so. It seems that politics has always influenced religion one way or another.

Jesus shut down the inquiries and trick questions of the Sadducees, so now the Pharisees sieged upon their opportunity to discredit and disqualify him. The Pharisaic lawyer questioned: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" To which Jesus, quoting Judaism's most fundamental, ancient and widely recited biblical passage, the Shema, answered: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind." Now it's important to speak people's language in order for them to understand what you are saying and to leave no

ambiguity. Jesus spoke directly from the Deuteronomic Law, so the Pharisees would understand him and wouldn't have any grounds to dispute what he was saying. Jesus spoke the truth, to which he added another truth from the book of Leviticus, like the first he said: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," also a word they would understand. But Jesus went even further when he stated: all the law and the prophets are held together by these two commandments.

Commentator Tim Beach Verhey states:

Jesus denounces them from misunderstanding and misusing the law.... Quoting the Shema, Jesus points out that the aim of the law is to orient one's entire life toward God. However, one cannot love God without loving what God loves! One cannot love God and oppress or exclude any of God's creatures—even one's enemies."

Jesus made it clear that we are to love and accept our neighbor, even if our neighbor is contrary to everything we hold dear, when he pointed out earlier in his Sermon on the Mount, "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matt 5:48)

I will be one of the first to admit that I find it difficult to love neighbors who aren't loving or lovable. It's difficult to love when neighbors propagate bigotry, prejudice, malice, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic rhetoric or use their privilege to get even further ahead, rather than help uplift or create opportunities for others. It's difficult to love neighbors when they have the power to make sure everyone has everything they need, but instead use their influence and power only to the benefit of others like themselves.

In the words of Dr. Martin L. King, Jr: "Power without love is reckless and abusive.... Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church to confront and question the power structure of the Roman Catholic Church that espoused indulgences and works, to declare that it is by faith alone by God's grace that we are in relationship with God. Martin Luther King, Jr "decided to stick with love, because hate is too great a burden to bear."

Jesus silenced his critics by proving himself to be the true and faithful interpreter of the Word of God, refusing to identify the love of God with rigid religious requirements. Before we think too highly of ourselves, we acknowledge that we too are prone to religious conventionalism and snobbery that uses faith in the service of power, prestige and exclusion of others who aren't like us. We tend to look down our noses at others who don't worship like us; we tend to look down our noses at people who don't live or look like us: we tend to look down our noses when people have opinions different than our own. So, Jesus' words and ministry are as relevant to us, and sometimes as painful, as they were to the scribes and Pharisees.

We need to be reminded every now and then that God is no respecter of person; that the kingdom of God includes everyone who humbles themselves, does unto the least of these, and embodies the power of God's unconditional, gracious, and forgiving love and to everyone who puts their faith through Jesus Christ in God. Beloved, the power of God's love transcends imposed requirements, conventions, space and chronology and is as relevant today as it was in the times of Jesus' earthly ministry, Martin Luther's act of defiance and Martin Luther King, Jr's time on earth. Our faith and God's grace is reformed and always reforming—that is the power of God's love for us.

Amen.