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Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
"The Word of God for the People of God"

October 22, 2017  
Matthew 5:17-20

I bring you greetings from the Office of Public Witness in the name of our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus. I have with me this morning my family, my wife Sheinita and children Kaela and James.

I am honored to play a role in **Georgetown Presbyterian Church's** series, **REFORMATION @500**, a focus on the **500<sup>th</sup> anniversary** of the Protestant Reformation commemorating when, on October 31 in 1517, a young German monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses, or statements, on the door of the church in Wittenberg Germany. His intent was not to break away from the church, but to reform the Roman Catholic Church. This series has produced sermons, lectures, discussions, Bible studies, a movie, a gallery tour, and even a sing-along! Lectures included "The Reformation Comes to Princeton and America", "The Reformation: The Next 500 Years" and yesterday Luther's "Freedom of a Christian". On five consecutive Sundays a sermon will be preached on the **five solas**: *God alone, faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone, and God's Glory Alone*: last Sunday was on "*Faith Alone*"; today is on "*Scripture Alone*" and next Sunday Rev. Dr. Vest will preach on "*God's Glory Alone*".

Let us **pray**.

Please consider with me the **sermon title**, "*The Word of God for the People of God*".

Our New Testament passage of scripture is **Matthew 5:17-20**. This passage is a part of the beatitudes, the nine blessings of God upon those who are merciful, poor in spirit, peacemakers. The beatitudes are a series of sermons Jesus preached. but which go much further than the nine, for Jesus addresses some of the most pertinent moral issues of his day and our own: anger, lust, divorce, love for enemies. But in-between Jesus pauses to address some of the criticisms from his critics who say he is corrupting the Word of God; that his teachings conflict with scripture. He corrects those who are saying that he is putting forth a new revelation. He cautions those who are suggesting that he is uttering a new law. His purpose is to stand in unequivocal support of the scriptures. He leaves no doubt as to the validity of God's law. Jesus has come not to abolish the law, rather to fulfill it.

This passage rings to the heart of what Martin Luther was trying to do. He did not want to instigate the start of the Protestant Church. His goal was not to break away from the Roman Catholic Church. He wanted to reform the church, to renew it, to bring it back to its intended purpose. He wanted the church's abuses to stop, the exploitation of the poor, the placing of the needs of the church above the needs of the very people it was called into being to serve.

Out of Luther's and the reformers efforts, five principles have arisen, the five solas. The third, *sola Scriptura*, deals with the *sufficiency of Scripture* as our supreme authority in all spiritual matters. In the day's of Luther, the teaching of the church, and therein the Pope, was considered the final authority in matters of faith and life. Luther disagreed and wanted scripture to be given a place of spiritual prominence in matters of theology and practice. Luther directed people to the Word of God as their ultimate hope and primary help in suffering, sin, and sanctification. The Scriptures, for Luther, were sufficient to comfort the hurting, confront the sinful and cheer the saint.

Luther's position won the day. All Christians today affirm the sanctity of scripture as the Word of God and ultimate authority in matters of faith and life. Presbyterians have three books: the Bible and the two books of the constitution, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. And if there is a conflict between the three, the teaching of the Bible reigns supreme.

There are three lessons we get from this passage utilizing three R's: revelation, reformation and redemption.

1. *The Bible is Revelation.*

Jesus said, *"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.<sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."*

Jesus reveals that the Bible is God's act of self-revelation revealing the heart and purpose of God; one who is "slow to anger and full of steadfast love". The Bible is God's revelation. It reveals to us that "God is love". It reveals that *"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."* (Jn 3:16) It reveals that the greatest commandment is to *"Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul and mind. And to love your neighbor as you love yourself."* It reveals that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of holy scripture.

In the Bible we come to know the Person who stands at the center of the Christian faith. The whole of the Old Testament looks forward to him and is fulfilled in him. The whole of the New Testament is an expression of the faith that in him the salvific purpose of God is achieved. Jesus Christ is the clearest revelation of who God is and what God promises and wills for faithful Christian life. Therefore, all scripture is to be interpreted in light of what Christ Jesus himself did and commanded, in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ.

Jesus is not doing away with the Old Testament and its laws and requirements, but His mission and purpose is much deeper than merely getting us to obey a set of laws and standards. The Bible is a book of faith and must be treated as such. We are not given permission to set it aside or to stop teaching it to others or to deny others the gift of revelation it contains.

According to theologian Shirley Guthrie in his book, "Christian Doctrines, "Scripture is to be interpreted in light of its own purpose. Scripture is 'given by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life'. We read the Bible rightly when we read it to learn who God is and how we may live faithfully in the presence of God. Recognize that Scripture Interprets Scripture. The Bible says a lot of things. And, taken out of context, a Bible verse or passage can be used to support just about any crackpot notion. On the other hand, the Lutheran approach understands that Scripture's message is, generally speaking, easily apprehended. When one encounters seemingly unclear or confusing Bible passages, then those passages need to be interpreted in light of (a) the clear passages and (b) the Bible's overall witness to a gracious God who justifies the ungodly on account of Christ... When there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. When we encounter passages that are hard to understand, we can look at other passages that throw a different light or more light on the question at hand. We must listen to the total witness of scripture, not just to selected passages that support what we already think and want to hear." (Shirley Guthrie, Christian Doctrine)

But throughout Christian history some have tried to limit the distribution of holy scripture, to prevent the masses from its revelation of freedom and justice.

**Luther** maintained that the scriptures contained all truth necessary for our salvation and spiritual life. Where it speaks, it is the highest and supreme authority on those matters. Everything necessary, everything binding on our consciences, and everything God requires of us is given to us in Scripture (2 Peter 1:3). We are forbidden to add to or take away from Scripture (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19). Scripture is the perfect and only standard of spiritual truth.

John Wyclif was born in 1330 and lived a very accomplished life. He was an Oxford scholar, English theologian, and philosopher. He became well-known throughout Europe for his opposition to the teaching of the organized Church, which he believed to be contrary to the Bible almost two centuries before the birth of Martin Luther. Wycliffe believed every Christian should study the Bible. He believed that studying the Bible was more important than listening to it read by the clergy and that everyone needed to have access to the Word of God. Wycliffe believed that it was necessary to reform the Church. But he was troubled by the fact that only priests had access to the Bible. It was written in Latin and very few people could read their native language, but especially not Latin. The church had established the belief that no person should translate the Bible on their own initiative, without approval from the Church. supported by his followers, Wycliffe translated from Latin into English manuscript copies of the scriptures. The Pope was so infuriated by his teachings and his translation of the Bible into English, that 44 years after Wycliffe died, he ordered his bones to be dug-up, crushed, burned and scattered in the river.

## 2. *The Bible teaches Reformation.*

Jesus said: *"Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."*

Jesus proclaimed that the word of God must not be relaxed, tampered with or contradicted. It speaks for itself and stands on its own feet. There is a call found in scripture to remain steadfast to the teachings of God in its pages. There is a call to return to faithfulness and obedience to God's Word. Throughout history the Word of God has been misrepresented, distorted and falsely interpreted for individual and corporate purposes, to mislead and convince people to adopt and believe in a certain ideology. We still see this today in the heresy of prosperity ministry which teaches that God's purpose for your life is material prosperity rather than spiritual salvation. We see it through ministers who support persons in political power whose policies are harmful to the lives of the very people who elected them. Jesus is calling us to stay close to the message of God as found in the pages of holy scripture.

One of the purposes of the Bible is a call to reformation in the sense of Luther's desire, a return to God's original purpose. There is a call for reform in the way we serve God and in the manner we are to live. We are called from unselfish, idolatrous ways of living to lives of justice, compassion, sacrifice and forgiveness. The prophets condemned the idolatrous practices of the Israelites and called for a return to worship on the one true God. Jesus confronted the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who were using the word of God for their own benefit.

We are still in need of reform. The church is in need of a third reformation. This country needs reform. One of the powerful experiences when one reads the history of America is her way of

remaking herself. An agrarian society has been remade into an industrial one. A rural society has become urban centered. A country of enslavement has become the land of the free. Plessey V. Ferguson has been replaced with Brown V. The Board of Education. The disenfranchisement of women has been replaced with female members of the House and Senate. America has shown the ways in which God transforms injustice into justice. But the journey is not yet over. For there is even more needed as rights previously won are being stripped away. The promises of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment are being stripped away through draconian and false legislation intended to strip African Americans of their right to vote by addressing erroneous charges of voter fraud and instituting voter ID restrictions. American citizens are denied full access to healthcare as Congress plays with policies produced not to increase coverage but to fulfill political promises despite the damage such legislation might do. American citizens are massacred by the hundreds by men using assault weapons and our political leadership is unwilling, unable and paralyzed by an organization through threats of primary challenges. Our economic system is in need of reform when people are not paid a living wage and have to work two or three jobs simply to make it in the richest nation in the world.

The Bible is a book of reformation and tells the story of the greatest reformer in human history, Jesus of Nazareth. And as his church, we are called to continue the call for reformation of the human heart, our institutions and the world.

Bishop Henry McNeil Turner, by the time he was 15, had read the entire Bible five times and memorized lengthy passages of Scripture. He was empowered by the words of scripture and it shaped his worldview to one of justice. He found that his Bible infused preaching gave him freedom to move throughout the slave-holding South, as he preached to both black and white audiences. Turner's preaching combined not only Scripture but also classics, such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the writings of popular theologians. He was highly gifted and cherished for his extemporaneously delivered sermons. His preaching earned Turner the nickname "Negro Spurgeon," after the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon. Through his extra-ordinary life he served as a minister, politician, postmaster, newspaper editor. He served as the first African American Army chaplain and was instrumental in recruiting Black troops to fight for the Union cause and the freedom of his people. He constantly challenged America to live up to his principles. When white state senators refused to seat him as a senator, his parting speech was entitled, "I Claim the Rights of a Man".

### 3. The Bible Promises Redemption.

*"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Faith causes for a righteousness that results in a permanent change in our heart and attitudes, a righteousness that transforms us to the core of our being. We fulfill the righteousness of the Law by surpassing the righteousness of the Pharisees. We fulfill it because it will not come from a Law written down on stone tablets, but will come because God has transformed our hearts so that the Law is within us. We must have a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees who demonstrated a false sense of piety. They thought that if you looked the role of a righteous person, said the right things, you were pleasing to God. But their actions contradicted those of people of faith. Righteousness does not come from following laws, rules or regulations, but from having a transformed heart. Only an internal law produces true righteousness, true holiness in God's followers. Jesus reminds us that we are not free to do as we please. There are still

requirements. The difference is that fulfilling them will come from a different place, from God's Spirit.

In 1521 Martin Luther was called to an assembly at Worms, Germany, to appear before Charles V, the Roman emperor. Luther thought it was for a debate. Rather it was a trial at which he was asked to recant his views or be declared a heretic which carried the death penalty. He replied, *"Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning ... then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."*

When reading and hearing the Word of God, Discern Law and Gospel. The art of discerning Law and Gospel, Command and Promise, is essential to an understanding of Sola Scriptura Lutheran-style. "The understanding of nearly all scripture and all theology depends upon the correct recognition of law and gospel." It is, of course, possible to contend for the principle of Sola Scriptura but at the same time interpret and proclaim scripture incorrectly. Most of the religious mischief and harm done in the name of Holy Scripture can be attributed to the improper discernment of law and gospel. For more on the discernment of Law and Gospel, see "A Brief Introduction to Law and Gospel" on this website.

The slogan Sola Scriptura developed out of the perception that certain Christian teachings and practices had little or no Biblical basis and therefore could be challenged. One of those was "indulgences" granted by the pope. Soon anything not recorded in the Bible such as Purgatory, the Treasury of Merits, and the Intercessions of the Saints were questioned and discarded by reformers. When he met with opposition to the translation he replied *"Christ and his apostles taught the people in that tongue that was best known to them. Why should men not do so now?"* For one to have a personal relationship with God, Wycliffe believed that need to be described in the Bible. Wyclif, by translating the Bible, made it the property of the masses and common to all and more open to the laity, and even to women who were able to read.

**NPR:** "The **Pope** arrived in Sweden for an event with world leaders of the **Lutheran World Federation** led a service at a Lutheran Cathedral in the city of Lund, and a Mass at the arena in Malmo on Tuesday. Sweden is a secular, majority-Lutheran country. Pope Francis told the magazine *La Civiltà Cattolica* that he hopes the trip will encourage Lutherans and Catholics to support each other, especially in places where Christians of different denominations are persecuted together. The Pope has been consistent in reaching out to other branches of Christianity - like the Russian Orthodox Church - and other faiths, including Islam and Judaism. While the pontiff's visit to Sweden is only for two days, it kicks off a yearlong commemoration of the Protestant Reformation. "It was the year 1517 when the German monk Martin Luther pinned his 95 Theses to the door of his Catholic church, denouncing the Catholic sale of indulgences - pardons for sins - and questioning papal authority. That led to his excommunication and the start of the Protestant Reformation. "The Catholic Church reacted with the Counter Reformation, and mutual enmity led to decades of religious wars that devastated central Europe. "The animosity and resentments left by the Reformation only began to heal after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, with the start of an ecumenical dialogue aimed at promoting Christian unity. "There are still some doctrinal disputes. But Pope Francis says that while theologians iron out their differences, the two churches can work together on social issues like caring for the poor, migrants and refugees, and combating persecution

of Christians." Sylvia also notes that, in the spirit of reconciliation, Pope Francis went so far as to praise Martin Luther as a great reformer. Luther was long deemed a heretic by the Catholic church."

Farai Chideya from the studios of WGBH Boston. Callahan authored "**The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible.**"

The fact of the Bible means that we are not left alone to talk about a God who is only the projection of our own desires and fears, a humanity that is only the result of our wishful thinking about ourselves, or a world that is only the reflection of our own pessimistic or optimistic view of life. The right interpretation of scripture. There is always the danger that we will find in the bible only what we take with us to it, that we will use it to confirm what we already think and will hear only what we want to hear.