

# What Is the Essence of Christianity?

Sermon Notes for Oct 29, 2017 at Brentwood – Reformation Sunday

Ps 1 (479) & Matthew 22:34-46 (979)



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 greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”(Matt 22:37-39)

## Provocative Ponderings that Call Forth Our Potential in Christ

- The young man, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther, unrolled the parchment, took out the hammer, and nailed his 95 theses to the door at All Saints Church in the German town of Wittenberg – the date was Oct 31, 1517, almost 500 years ago – it was the symbolic start of the Protestant Reformation – a movement to reform the church that has flowed into the life and mission of this congregation – many of the remembrances of the Reformation that I have read over the past year have focused on what we should think and what we should do to be faithful to the reforms initiated by Martin Luther – but as I re-read the document, for the first time in 50 years (since taking Reformation History at the University of Toronto with James Estes), I find something else at the core of these theses – they are about relationships – with God, with others, and with ourselves – God forgives our part in the complex rebellion of humanity against the limits God set on us in creation, reconciles us into a right relationship with the divine community, including all other human beings, and sets us back on the right path to our authentic contribution to the well-being of God’s creation – this is the essence of Christianity the Reformation desired to restore – this is the essence of Christianity that Jesus affirmed in the disputation recorded in our reading this morning
- The most important thread that runs through the Reformation, as I have read it’s proponents over the years, is that everything starts and ends with God who created, redeemed, and continually reforms us – we are constantly being reconciled and restored to the place that God gave us in creation – companionship in caring for creation – so, the essence of faith in that God, as Jesus encapsulated it so powerfully in our text this morning, is love God with your whole being, then with that trust inspiring your resilience, love your neighbour and yourself – all of that is possible because God first loves us and wants us back, with the Holy Trinity, working out the well-being of the world – reforming our communal and personal lives for that purpose is a calling worth continuing – one of the mantras from the wing of the Reformation that arose from the preaching and teaching of John Calvin and flowed into Presbyterianism around the world is this – “Be reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God” – that Word, as Calvin understood it, is the living presence of Jesus Christ in our midst, witnessed to constantly by the Holy Spirit in and through the church – so, as we say in our Brentwood Declaration, “In the beginning, God ...” and “In the end, God ...” – the essence of Christianity = God’s generous initiative followed by our grateful response – when that rhythm is disrupted, things go wrong very quickly – when that rhythm remains wrong over many generations, the wrongs multiply and spread disastrously in our life together – it is by God’s grace alone, working in and through us, that the healthy rhythm of loving God, loving neighbour, and loving self is restored

Notes for a sermon preached by Brian Fraser,  
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## **So, what are we going to do with this ...**

As I thought about what we do with this effort to consider how the essence of Christianity, what Jesus called a good summary of all the Law (what Psalm 1 is singing about) and the prophets, animated the Reformation, I recalled what I know of the means by which the Reformation spread – through communities of people tired of the abuse and exploitation that they were experiencing from their leaders and those who gained from supporting their attitudes and actions – these people began to see the world differently, through the eyes of God as revealed in the Scripture's witness to Jesus, the Christ, in whom God revealed how God made humanity to be – someone told me of a conversation they had had a couple of weeks ago in which one person said, "I need a little more Jesus in my life" – that's a wonderful aspiration – and it captures the essence of Christianity beautifully – I pray and hope that our worship this morning has awakened a little more to the presence of Jesus in your life

## **A Framework for our Prayers of Thanks, Help, and Awe**

On this Reformation Sunday, let us give thanks for all the people through whom the light of your love has infiltrated the complex webs of human rebellion that have ensnared this world in fear, hatred, and abuse – penetrate our souls with the light of your love – stir in us the power of a gratitude that spreads your vision of justice, peace, and joy through all our circles of influence – especially, this morning, we give thanks for .....

You know better than we do, forgiving God, the help that we need to grow in your grace, to live in your love, to have more of Jesus in our work and witness – help us pay closer attention to the presence of your Spirit in us and around us – help us draw on your strength when we grow tired, frustrated, confused, and discouraged – remind us continually of the kind of gratitude that pleases you most – loving you, loving others, and loving the authentic self you created us to be – especially, this morning, we pray for your help for ...

We conclude our prayers this morning remembering the awesome patience with which you have pursued us to bring us back to our true calling to be companions with you in blessing your creation – help us see that patient grace at work in our lives more and more clearly

And embed the pattern of prayer that Jesus taught us ever more deeply in our souls as we sing ...