

# Sermon for Reformation Sunday, October 31, 2021 - "We Shall Love"

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.  
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Really? This *shall* happen? How?

Some days it takes all our heart, soul, mind and strength just to get out of bed and face the day. It takes a lot to even be pleasant to others, especially before coffee. The news of the world is so disheartening. The challenges can feel insurmountable. We aren't sure we can even trust God in these times, much less love. And, there are a lot of people who are really, really hard to love right now in this polarized time.

So, how are we supposed to love God and other people with our whole selves? I imagine the first people to hear these love commands probably wondered the same thing. These commands are given to God's people as they are wandering in the desert, after God has led them out of slavery. They've been oppressed by Egypt for generations. They are surrounded by enemies. God has promised to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey, yet they struggle to trust that. They grumble against God and argue with one another.

As they wander in the desert, God instructs Moses to tell them, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And as they are preparing to enter the promised land, Moses says to the people, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." These seem like really big asks. The people don't even say thank you for the manna God sends to feed them in the desert. Yet God expects them to jump in with both feet to love God and other people wholeheartedly? Maybe God should have more realistic expectations: Like, "Be nice, don't hit, clean up after yourself". Those seem like more reasonable commands for these difficult people, more reasonable for us.

We, too, are wandering in the wilderness - so much about life these days is uncertain and frightening. We as a species are so often unkind, violence is all around us, we leave mess and destruction in our wake. How can God really expect us to love wholeheartedly in this wilderness? And yet, what a relief it would be, what a joy it would be to love with our whole selves - to devote our hearts, minds, and strength to loving God and God's ways of love. What peace we would know if we could all love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. What a glorious world this would be.

God longs for us to know the joy of living in the way of love. God longs for us to know a world where love reigns. And so, God commands us to love. God sets the bar high: love with all you've got, with all you are. But God doesn't just command love and say, "alright, good luck with that." God begins by loving us completely, fully, wholeheartedly with all of God's self. This is a key witness of Martin Luther, of reformers of the church: That the commands of God are gifts of a gracious God and that we live them out only by the grace and love of God. God acts first to love us, to make love a possibility for us.

God also gives us the words of scripture, commands and promises that teach us to love. We are instructed to place these words upon our hearts, the ancient rabbis taught, so that when our hearts break with the pain of the world, God's word of love will fall into our hearts. Then our hearts will be broken open to more fully love the world rather than shattering into pieces that harm others. So, the pain of the world doesn't have to prevent us from loving. Instead, with God's word of love the pain of the world can open us to love more.

Most importantly, God enters into the wilderness with us in Jesus. God, in Jesus, shares all of the pain and struggle of our lives. And Jesus gives of his whole self, his very life, in love for us. When we are loved so deeply, so thoroughly, then loving wholeheartedly becomes a possibility for us, a life-giving and healing possibility.

As author Fredrick Buechner writes, "You shall love the Lord your God" becomes, in the end, less a command than a promise. You *shall* love. And, he writes, the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love [God] at last, as from the first [God] has loved us—loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because [God] has been in the wilderness with us. [God] has been in the wilderness for us. [God] has been acquainted with our grief. And, loving [God], we will come at last to love each other too."

Buechner continues, quoting Deuteronomy, our first reading today, "And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And rise we shall, out of the wilderness, every last one of us, even as out of the wilderness Christ rose before us. That is the promise, and the greatest of all promises."<sup>1</sup>

Beloved, you are loved, God is with you.

You will rise again and again from the wilderness to love God and love others.

That is a promise.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*. Harper Collins: 2017, p. 154.