

“Not Only the Gospel”
Preached by Rev. William Brown
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Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church: “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves.”

Not only the Gospel, but also our own selves. Sharing our very lives.

That’s what I want to talk about today. But to get there, first we need to talk about Tuesday.

As you know, Tuesday is Halloween, just two days away, which means that at this point you are surely putting the finishing touches on your costumes. And, this year, I assume that most of you will be dressing up as Martin Luther. Right? Right? ... That blank stare is exactly the same level of enthusiasm that I got from our 4-year-old, Luke. What’s the deal? You don’t want to be Martin Luther this year, either? This would be such a great costume, and an easy one, too! And all you need is a robe of some kind (like this one!), and a hammer. Done! Martin Luther!

As you may recall from history classes, Luther famously nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. This document listed 95 arguments about church practice and theology, and he nailed it up on the church door for everyone to see. The date for this famous act of protest? October 31, 1517 – exactly 500 years ago this Tuesday! Tuesday is the quincentennial. (Yes, I had to look that word up.)

That day, 500 years ago, was a turning point in history, considered by many historians as the start of the Protestant Reformation. This movement upended the church and eventually led to the formation of Protestant denominations like ours. All because some guy named Martin got angry and nailed a list of complaints to the front of the building.

But of course, the reality is that Martin Luther wasn’t just some guy who got mad. This Reformation he helped start didn’t just happen; it was a cause to which he devoted his entire life.

Let me tell you one story about Luther. As his controversial writings spread, he got in trouble with the church and was excommunicated. Then, a council led by the emperor ordered him to be arrested, and possibly executed. Luther fled and went into hiding. But do you want to know what kind of person Luther was? He said to himself, “hmmm, I’m stuck here, imprisoned in this hideout... I know what I’ll do! I’ll translate the entire Bible into German!” The Bible at that time could only be found in Latin, which meant that only priests could read it. Luther thought people should

read the Bible for themselves, so he went ahead and translated the whole thing into German. With no computers or copy machines, it took a while.

So on Tuesday, when you're out trick-or-treating in your Martin Luther costume, remember how he nailed the 95 theses to the church door. But also remember the long years he spent laboring over his many books, articles, hymns, and Bible translation. This was the work to which he devoted his entire self, in service of the Gospel. That's why we remember Luther today on Reformation Sunday, and sing one of his famous hymns, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

When I think of Luther, I like to imagine him there, hunched over a desk, translating the ancient yet eerily familiar words of the apostle Paul, written from his jail cell. Like Luther, Paul suffered and was imprisoned for the Gospel he preached. In the passage we read today, Paul mentions being "shamefully mistreated" and preaching "in spite of great opposition." But, also like Luther, Paul is not slowed down by this; he devotes himself completely to the work. As Paul writes in today's text, "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves."

Preaching the Gospel wasn't a matter of presenting a convincing argument; for Paul, sharing the Gospel meant sharing himself.

In your life, has there been anyone who shared the Gospel with you that way? Someone who taught you the love of God by sharing their very self with you?

Perhaps it was a Sunday School teacher. Or that quiet figure who sat in the pew in front of you, every week, year after year? Or a parent or grandparent. Who taught you the love of God?

In addition to being Reformation Sunday, today we are also observing All Saints Day, singing "For All the Saints" and lifting prayers of thanksgiving. We pause to remember the saints of the church who gave of themselves in service of the Gospel. There are famous figures like Martin Luther or the apostle Paul, but we also remember the quiet, local saints whose dedication nurtured the faith within us.

On All Saints Day, we remember their names, their faces, the way they devoted their lives to the Gospel.

Our reading from 1 Thessalonians describes this self-giving in beautiful, maternal imagery: "we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children." New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa notes that wet nurses were common and beloved in those days, taking care of and nursing young children. This passage, then, takes it even a step further, describing such a beloved nurse's tender care for her own children.ⁱ

The image of a devoted mother is one we can relate to, and Paul uses it because his readers would understand in an instant how complete and all-inclusive that devotion is. It is with that total, motherly dedication that Paul has committed himself to the Thessalonians. He's sharing himself completely with them.

We see that devotion in Paul, in the saints of the church from our own lives, and in great historical figures like Martin Luther. But all of these examples of Christian devotion find their model in the life of Jesus.

Today's Gospel lesson from Matthew is a rich text, central to our faith. But since we're already talking about Reformation Sunday, All Saint's Day, and 1 Thessalonians (it's a lot, I know—hang with me), I'm just going to zero in on one part of the Matthew passage.

Jesus is asked which commandment is greatest. His response? Love God. But then he continues: "Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

Loving God takes your whole heart, soul, and mind. As Paul would say, it means sharing not just words about the Gospel, but also your whole self: heart, soul, and mind. Loving God is not about sentimental love; it's commitment, devoting yourself to others: "love your neighbor as yourself."

These verses are familiar to us, in many ways the core of our faith, the essence of what it means to follow Christ.

We strive to love God and our neighbor.

Sometimes that love means being gentle and nurturing, like a nurse caring for her children.

But not always.

Today in particular, on the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's famous act of protest, it's important to remember that when we strive to love God completely, sometimes the job requires a hammer. Love can be gentle and sweet, but it can also have a hard edge to it.

That was certainly true for Jesus. Even though we usually envision Jesus as a kind, good shepherd, some of the stories about him show his forceful side.

In particular, the chapters of Matthew we've been reading the past few weeks show a Jesus who is fierce and passionate, if not downright angry.

The chapter before today's reading, Jesus turned over the tables in the Temple. He proceeds to tell parables with a not-so-subtle message against those in power: things like, "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

The religious leaders become so angry they want to kill him. Time and again, they try to trick Jesus into giving an answer that would justify putting him to death.

In the passage we read last week, it was a loaded question about paying taxes.

After some more back-and-forth, a few more gotcha questions, we arrive at today's passage, asking which commandment was most important. And it's right there, in the midst of the intense, verbal sparring with his opponents, that Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... Love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus commands love, but the way he shows love sometimes has a sharp edge.

Commentator Lance Pape notes that Jesus saw no contradiction between being loving and being "formidable." He writes, "Following the path of love leads him to jump into debates and conflicts with his whole self. Love leads Jesus into all kinds of situations that are not just uncomfortable, but dangerous. Eventually, love gets him killed."ⁱⁱ

I'll admit, confrontational love makes me uncomfortable.

When we talk about love, we usually think about a kind, grandmotherly sort of compassion and tenderness—not a love with boxing gloves on.

But you know, if we are going to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, then sometimes that requires speaking up, facing things head on. And that is still loving; loving the way Jesus did, completely committed to the path of God.

It's the same commitment that led Paul to write defiant letters from prison, saying that the adversaries of the church would "suffer the punishment of eternal destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9).

It's the same commitment that led Martin Luther to pick up his hammer in a dramatic act of protest.

So, what about us? Does the Gospel call us to be a people of protest?

Luther had his hammer, Paul had his pen, and even Jesus had moments of table-turning confrontation. What about us?

We live in a world filled with protests: Charlottesville City Council meetings, NFL games, August 12, anywhere near a Planned Parenthood or a confederate statue. Everywhere you look, there's a protest. Is that our calling?

Some say yes, some say no... but whether or not you feel called to go hold up a sign somewhere, our calling goes beyond words on a sign. It's not just about sharing what the Gospel leads you to believe, is it? We're called to share "not only the Gospel" but our own selves.

Sometimes it is an act of love to speak out on behalf of those being mistreated in some way.

But that means more than a Facebook post or attending a rally. Those things may help build awareness and solidarity, but at the end of the day, those don't cost us much. The calling we receive from God is to love with our whole selves; with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; not just sharing an argument, but joining in the work with our whole lives.

And you know what? When we stop and think about it, I see this kind of "protest" going on in our congregation already—the kind of protest that both follow Jesus's example of speaking up when it matters, and follow his instruction to love God and neighbor with our whole selves:

Might our PACEM ministry be understood as an act of loving protest against the situation of homeless people in our community? We refuse to allow them to have nowhere to stay, so we get involved.

When our offerings support CBF missionaries Jon and Tanya Parks, are we participating in their act of loving protest against the poor treatment of the Roma people in Europe, a "protest" that led them to move to Slovakia to share not only the Gospel but their lives as well?

Closer to home, is packing bags of food for Venable kids an act of loving protest against hunger and systemic poverty, a refusal to let those kids lack meals all weekend?

Is a bereavement basket a form of loving protest against the isolation and despair of grief? We won't let you go through this alone. We won't let you be forgotten.

Are small acts of kindness (a smile, a birthday card, a phone call) a form of loving protest against a world that seems cold, individualistic, uncaring?

Yes, I believe they are.

Of course, there's much more we can and should do. But this kind of embodied protest is happening, and it's part of what it means to be the church of God.

Protest, in all its many forms, is a refusal to accept the brokenness of the world as all there is, a refusal to accept that things cannot get better.

Luther hammered in his protest because he knew the Church could do better. Jesus railed against the religious leaders of his day because he knew that people of faith could do better. And saints throughout the centuries have devoted their lives, sometimes gently and sometimes forcefully, to pull the world more in line with God's kingdom of love, because they knew this world could be better.

Where is God calling us to act? As individuals, as a church, where is God asking our full commitment, with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength?

Our broken world is waiting.

May we so live our lives that those around us will hear us saying, with Paul, "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves."

Franciscan Benediction:

May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart

May God bless you with anger,
At injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace

May God bless you with tears,
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort and To turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done

ⁱ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, in the *Interpretation Bible Commentary* series, especially p. 26-28 and 31-34.

ⁱⁱ Lance Pape, "Commentary on Matthew 22:34-46,"
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2202