

*One of the scribes came near and heard the Sadducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"*

It's still a good question. As this is Reformation Sunday among our Lutheran friends, I thought I might give you a taste of what Martin Luther said about the Sadducees of his own day: about the disputes of councils and learned doctors like the disputes Jesus encountered in this morning's Gospel:

You know that our soul-murderers have proposed to us that what the councils and the learned doctors decide and decree, that we should accept, and not judge for ourselves whether it is right or not. They have become so certain of the infallibility of the councils and doctors that they have now established the edict, publicly seen, that if we do not accept what they say, we are put under the ban.

Soul-murderers—now that's Luther for you, never at a loss for the stabbing phrase. For him, of course, the soul-murderers were the papists: the popes and doctors and councils of the Roman church, and those who bent their wills to them. It was of course the Roman church that had shaped him as a monk. But in doing so, as he claimed time and time again, it was that same Roman church, with its edicts and doctrines and bans, that would seek to murder the soul that it claimed it sought to save. Soul-murderers. The time is ripe, he declared, to judge for ourselves, to take up arms against the ecclesiastical powers of this world:

Let us take a spear in hand and make a hole in their shield; yea, their resolutions shall be a spider's web. And you should, moreover, use upon them the spear which until now they have used upon us, and hold before them its point.<sup>1</sup>

Ouch.

Luther's sixteenth century was a violent time, but nowhere near as violent as our own twentieth-century, and what is now taking its equally violent shape as our twenty-first. I for one sometimes envy Luther his own ferocious certainties, even as I deplore his vicious anti-Semitism and his abandonment of the very peasant masses his theology was intended to liberate. Luther knew well how to love his God with his whole heart and mind and soul, free from any rules and regulations. We owe him a deep debt of gratitude for this. But that love of neighbor part? Well, loving his neighbor was just as challenging for him as it is most of the time for us. Not to mention loving his enemies, whom he usually held at spearpoint, as, in these polarized days, when we are honest, so do most of us, myself included.

So enjoy the fierce certainties of today's hymns and anthems, but bear in mind that such ferocity can too easily lead us astray. In these troubled days especially, it is all too easy to lose our way in the ashes and smoke of our own smoldering anxieties and our own half-hidden hatreds. We are no different than Martin Luther in this regard. Let's face it, the devil that Luther imagined so vividly is a subtle beast, and shows up in our lives when we least expect him to encounter him—in our own hatreds, in our own fears, and even in our own liberal self-righteousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, Sermon "On the Office of Preaching", <https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/luther/preoff.htm>

So as an antidote to bipolar thinking, where sheep are sheep and goats are goats, and goats are destined for slaughter, consider the story of Ruth. Ruth, the consummate outsider: bereft of husband, and so bereft of any protection against the hatred of the native toward the unprotected stranger. She had every incentive to take refuge in the place most familiar to her, to return to her native country of Moab and abandon her new life in Palestine. Yet of her own free will, in the largeness and greatness of her heart, she remains loyal to Naomi her beloved mother-in-law, even if it means leaving behind everything familiar to her, every tie to Moabite land and Moabite nation that made her what she was:

“Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
Where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.

Imagine what might have happened to Ruth had she lived in our own hate-filled days. I think of Ruth as both immigrant and refugee, left adrift in a hostile land by the death of her husband. She is undocumented, homeless, out of place. Fodder for deportation. Once you imagine her like that, you will begin to sense the power of her decision to stay: the power of her commitment, the power of will that leads her to sacrifice everything safe, everything familiar, for the sake of her love for another. And not just love for another, but love for someone completely Other, a woman equally abandoned, equally vulnerable: Naomi, a widowed Israelite abroad, bereft of the protection first of her husband, and now of her dead sons. Returning to a homeland after so many years away, as a widow she will find herself just as socially adrift, invisible, and despised, as her Moabite daughter-in-law.

No wonder, generations later, Matthew’s Gospel will include Ruth the Moabite in the list of Jesus’ ancestors: a woman like Jesus powerful in her very weakness, like Jesus courageous in the cause of human love. “Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge.” What Ruth says to Naomi, Jesus says to every wanderer, every refugee, every outsider, every exile, every castaway. “Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge.” If we are willing to believe it, Jesus even says that to us.

So on this Reformation Sunday, embrace your freedom in Christ as Luther so eloquently proclaimed it. But that means also to love your neighbor as yourself. Whatever the cost. Whatever the consequences. No matter that the soul-murderers of this world would have you do otherwise. In these times of such anxiety and such hatred, where the devil seems to lurk at every next corner, we need to be careful, to be wise as serpents, as innocent as doves. We need to be careful about where we decide to go, and where we decide to lodge our hearts. There are many temptations to hatred in this world. So many temptations not to love but to scorn our neighbors. “Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge.” Wherever we go, wherever we lodge our souls in these divided and contentious times, may it be a place where Jesus would be willing to join us.

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