

**October 26 2014**

**Scripture Lessons ~**

*Psalm 99*

*Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18*

*Matthew 22:34-46*

**Sermon** *Playing by the Rules*

Even though I risked what I would consider my life and limb for many years to drive the Pennsylvania turnpike every winter to watch my boys play basketball and I can hold my own in a conversation about the Portland Trail Blazers and the Philadelphia Seventy-Sixes, in reality, I know, this is going to be a surprise, I know very little about basketball. In fact in Junior High my intramural team was called the Coyote and our team color was pitch black. So you can tell what a wonderful basketball player I must have been.

What I do know is a basketball court is designed with two sets of parallel lines forming the boundaries around the court. The boundaries serve to limit the area where the game can be played and they provide order to help the game have meaning and some fun for the contestants. The team with the ball controls the tempo of the game by doing almost anything they want to do within reason and the rules of the game are set within the boundary lines of the court. However if the players with ball stepped on one of those boundary lines he or she is out of and the order of the game is broken and the ball is given, of course, to the other team.

Of the 613 commandments in the Hebrew Scriptures two commandments serve as life boundaries. Jesus emphasized these boundaries in his conversations with the Pharisee who asked him, according to Matthew's Gospel, which is the greatest, which is the first commandment of the law. Of course it was a trick question and was usually a trap being set in the conversation when the superlative response is being requested, like when somebody jumps you and says, "Who is the best employee in this company" or when somebody jumps me and says "Which church member gives the most money to this church". Trick questions like these which were asked Jesus, called for an

either or response; but you know Jesus was a master at avoiding these kinds of traps and offering an alternative that his questioner really never considered before; which Jesus managed to do in this situation too. Maybe his questioner had in mind some possible answers that Jesus might offer in this case or he may even have thought, if Jesus said that the love of God was the most important then he would challenge Jesus about relating to his fellow human being. If Jesus had said love your neighbor was the most important, the teacher of the law would then nail him right about not giving first allegiance to God alone. But Jesus responded masterfully to the law professor, by saying all of life is to be lived within the boundaries of loving God with our total being and loving our neighbor as ourselves; in reality a pretty broad area in which to function in life.

The Ten Commandments given in this situation are summarized in two commandments. The more than 600 examples and interpretations of those commandments in the Old Testament which the law professor well knew are boiled down to these two. In essence Jesus is saying something that is hard for us to accept, that you can do anything that you want in life as long as you love God and you love your neighbor as yourself. St Augustus expressed the idea even a little more flippantly, love God and do whatever you want in the rest of your life. Jesus said that everything expressed in the law and the prophets could be summarized in those two commandments. This was a concise way to call people to a single focus and purpose.

You know the one thing above all others in this life is to do the will of God. But what is God's will? I think it is often fairly easy to determine what God's will is but it is the details that go along with living out that will that becomes the problem. We often want to make God's will for us a very difficult thing to know indeed. We kind of clothe it in mystery and all kinds of struggle but the will of God for all creation, I think, stands out clearly in the Bible. The will of God for our lives is simply to love God and to love our fellow human beings.

Now how can we best fulfill and carry out this mandate in our lives is largely up to us to determine and this is where the struggle in our Christian faith comes in. For here we are to use the freedom and

creativity that God has give to each one of us to determine how we will go about communicating our love for God and our love for our neighbors in this life. The avenues that available to us to fulfill God's call, I don't have to tell you, are really quite limitless.

There are those however, who suggest that God has a very specific and definite design for each person's life and that each person's task in life is to determine what that design is. Now let's spin this out a little bit, implied in this suggestion is that God is somehow an architect who has drawn up a set of blueprints for each one of us and if we can just find that set of blueprints, and if you look for them in my office you might have a hard time finding them, and all of our lives is mapped out for us and we don't have to worry too much about anything. I think I find at least two traps in this line of thinking, first of all, I think, it is contrary to the nature of the freedom which God created in the universe and the freedom that God gave to the human beings to think and make decisions for themselves. But secondly I think this attitude turns life into a kind of guessing game about what is on God's mind. It suggests if I guess right, life will automatically go very smoothly for me but the convert is even more diabolically. If I guess wrong trouble is going to follow me very step of my life. This, of course, is a kind simplistic contradiction to what has happened in the lives of people throughout the centuries who sought to follow Jesus in their lives. I believe each one of us may in fact have different avenues our lives might take and God can help us to make the very best life possible of any mistake or wrong turns that we might take in life. Many of those in fact who seemed to have followed God the most closely, think about this, and strangely have had the greatest problems and difficulties in their lives? But this did not have so much to do with guessing God's will incorrectly as it did in going against the grain of society which Jesus often calls us to do. No one for example served God any better than did Jesus but no one had greater difficulty. Nobody had greater difficulty disappointment; nobody had greater mistreatment than did Jesus but there also was no one more at peace and no one had more calm in the midst of the storms swirled around his life than our lord Jesus either So Jesus is drawing broad and far

reaching boundaries in which we are called to live our lives on this earth. When we move away from our focus on loving God and our fellow human beings we also move away from God's best pathway for our lives. When we stay within these boundaries I think we can experience the peace which passes understanding even in the midst of storms which swirls around our lives as well.

These two commandments establish a sort of perimeter for our living they lay out the dimensions of a very fertile field upon which each of us can live and grow our lives. So we are encouraged on this Reformation Sunday to seek in our lives.

And together we say AMEN