

Breakthrough!
Matthew 22:34-46, Reformation Sunday
Pastor Judy Bangsund

What do you think? Think there might be a few Giants fans out there? Jim and I enjoy baseball, and often go to watch our *minor* league *San Jose* Giants when we can. Of course, Major League loyalty is a different matter – but we won't go there today. At the moment, we're rooting for the Giants, and since we are getting to know those players better, are gradually becoming fans (but don't tell Jim I said that; he's doing his best not to follow his instincts and root for Dodger blue).

It's fun to watch the games. And what about those players! They are putting every fiber of their being into their game. I love watching the slow-motion clips of the pitchers – the wind up, the long stretch, the delivery and the follow through. What incredible athletes they are, achieving pitches up to 100 mph. And of course, the rest of the team (both teams) are playing their guts out. And as I watch them, I wonder: what it would look like to love God the way they play baseball – with heart, soul and mind.

Today is Reformation Sunday, when we (particularly as Lutheran Christians) celebrate a very important event in Christian history – a breakthrough of the Gospel into a church that had lost its way. The medieval Church had become rich, powerful and corrupt, and the Gospel message had gotten trampled in the mud. People were told they must make penance for their sins, and even that they could buy their way into heaven! Getting right with God was all about what you must do; the message of what God had done for them in Christ was lost. It created a very heavy burden for those Christians to carry.

Luther, as a young man, was also caught up in this misguided theology. It wasn't until he was a monk, reading through the book of Romans, that the Gospel broke through to him: Getting right with God is not a matter

of keeping a string of rules or paying enough money. Getting right with God is all about *faith*. It is simply receiving God's free gifts in Christ. Luther was a changed man from that moment.

These past 5 weeks (reading through the book of Romans) have underscored that Reformation breakthrough. It changed Luther's life; it changed the world. And it can change your life, too. I hope you have heard and absorbed the incredible message that you no longer need to be burdened by guilt, doubt and despair. These are byproducts of a life trying to earn God's favor. Instead grace, hope and victory are yours through faith – simply by believing that Jesus' work on the cross is *for you*. These truths must be grasped anew every day, because we live in a do-it-yourself world. We heard this truth again today in Romans 3: “... *all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*” Those are powerful words, my friends. Ask anyone who lives under the shadow of guilt, anyone who fears the grave. The Gospel breaks through into your life and mine, just as it did in Luther's, and turns you around.

The Reformation breakthrough, salvation by grace through faith, all centers on Jesus. Last week you heard about the unconditional love of God given to us through Christ. That's the core of everything we believe. From this hub everything else radiates. Today Jesus addresses your *response* to God's great love. What difference does it make in your life? How do you put such a powerful drive to work? You see, the Reformation breakthrough – God's grace – leads to new doors in your life. Now that you have been made right with God, where will you go with that? What is now possible, that wasn't possible before? It can be a new breakthrough.

You see, God loves you fully and completely. Such a love will create a new kind of love in you. I have a friend, now married for about 40

years, who says that her husband asked her about 50 times to marry him, before she said “yes.” She’s independent and stubborn; she put up all kinds of resistance, kept turning him down. (Now, I need to tell you he wasn’t stalking her or anything like that; they were dating and she wasn’t telling him to get out of her life.) I think what happened was this: his constancy and persistence finally won her over. His love created in her a similar love for him. That’s how God’s love works in you: God loves you so irresistibly that finally you begin to love him back. So what does *that* look like?

Jesus tells us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.” Now this wasn’t original with Jesus. God’s love isn’t new; the response it creates isn’t new, either. Moses summed up all 613 laws in this, the greatest of all commandments. But while Jesus quoted Moses, at the same time, he re-shaped it in the light of his own impending sacrifice on the cross. Jesus loved with heart, soul and mind.

So let’s take a closer look at what it means to love the way the Bible calls us to love. Again I think about the ballplayers in the World Series – how they play that game with every fiber of their being: heart, soul and mind. Jesus says, love God that way – love him with everything you’ve got. This kind of love goes beyond simply saying: “Yeah, that makes sense. I can go along with that.” Jesus is saying, love means you are *all in*. Love does not settle for less. Love goes the distance.

Love God with your heart, soul and mind. What does it mean to love God with all your heart? Heart is about passion; it’s about intensity. Do you know anyone who has a passion for God?

Philip Yancey says that the one thing that all great heroes of the faith hold in common is their passion. Think of David, who danced before the Lord with all his might. Think of Peter, the first to confess Jesus as

the Son of God. Think of Paul and Silas, who were once beaten by a large mob of people and then whipped by the rulers. Afterward they were thrown into prison and the jailer put them in stocks. They were in terrible conditions, suffering from painful wounds, their hands and feet were locked in a very uncomfortable position. But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. They were passionate about Christ, loving the others around them, wanting them to believe too. Even when a sudden earthquake loosed everyone's chains, they didn't run but stayed where they were. In so doing, they saved the life of the jailer, who came to faith along with his family. Paul and Silas had a passion for sharing Christ, not for saving their own necks. And as a result, many came to faith that day.

So loving with all your heart is passion, an *intensity* that doesn't give up. What then, does it mean to love with all your soul? The Hebrew word for "soul" does not mean some distinct part of you, like the spiritual part. Hebrew speakers would not divide up a person like that (body and soul). Instead, it means the integrated "self" or "being." Keeping your actions consistent with your faith. We might call it character. Or *integrity*.

Bonhoeffer comes to my mind when I think of integrity. He was a man of singular purpose, trying to follow Jesus while living in Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer professed faith in Christ, but he faced great odds as he lived it out. I am impressed by his courage – standing up to the Nazi regime when many other Christians simply went along to get along. Bonhoeffer sacrificed his career, his impending marriage and his health as he went to prison for his faith. He continued to minister to other prisoners in concentration camps, bringing them Communion, praying with them, ministering to them. And finally he was executed, only weeks before the Americans arrived. On a cold April morning, he

was told to strip down in preparation for hanging. One of the guards, noticing him shiver, taunted him: “So, Pastor, are you afraid?” And Bonhoeffer turned to him in some surprise saying, “No; only cold.” He approached the scaffold without hesitation, confident in God’s grace. Assured of the hope of eternal life. Bonhoeffer loved God with all his soul, with character and integrity.

Intensity and integrity. And finally, *intelligence*. The Bible says to love the Lord your God with your *mind*. Don’t check your brains at the door when you come to Christ. Don’t leave your mind out of the equation. Bring all the intelligence you have to the love you show for Christ.

Many people (again) come to mind when I consider those who have brought their considerable intelligence to their faith. Theologians, physicians and psychologists litter the pages of Church history. A current scientist, Dr. Francis Collins, was the head of the Human Genome Project. He is now the director of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. A brilliant man, he came to faith as a scientist and a physician, as documented in his best selling book, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. Collins sees no contradiction between faith and reason. He says, “The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshiped in the cathedral or the laboratory.” Collins considers himself to be a “serious Christian,” an evangelical believer. And he loves God with all his mind.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind – with intensity, integrity and intelligence. Jesus then adds, “and your neighbor as yourself.”

That second commandment is important. It would be simplistic to think you can love God without also loving his world. Loving God with your whole being will naturally reach out to others. How could you not?

When God loves this world as he does -- without condition and without reserve -- then it's hard to imagine *returning* his love without also sharing the *object* of his love.

The Gospel writer Luke tells this same story we heard this morning, but with a twist. It starts out the same: one of the teachers of the law tested Jesus asking: What is the greatest commandment? And Jesus gave his answer as you have already heard. But Luke's Gospel goes a little further. The teacher, feeling uncomfortable with Jesus' reply, pushed back. Trying to justify himself he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" hoping for a little wiggle room. But instead, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. Now, Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day shared about as much love as Israelis and Palestinians do today. Not much wiggle room there! Loving God naturally flows into loving your neighbor -- and like the love of God, requires heart, soul and mind.

Jesus wasn't just answering a test question. He was turning the tables to challenge them (and us) with Gospel love. God has saved you from eternal death. He has forgiven you and made your life on earth worth living. He has loved you unconditionally. Therefore, how will you live your new life? Well, the obvious answer is to love him back -- totally and without reserve. And that means loving your neighbor too.

I close with a comment found in the newspaper this week. Perhaps you saw it in the editorial section, an article written by secular columnist Richard Cohen. He writes of "religious" people who have volunteered to go to West Africa to care for Ebola patients. They know they are putting their lives at risk. Cohen specifically mentions Kent Brantly, a missionary who came down with Ebola in Liberia, but was then shipped home where he recovered. Brantly testified before Congress; the President invited him to the White House. In Cohen's words: "[Brantly] aw-shucked his considerable courage by invoking God. I envy his faith.

I'm in awe of his courage.” I *envy his faith*. I'm in *awe* of his *courage*. Clearly, Brantly's words and actions displayed an integrity of faith and love that spoke volumes to Cohen.

Brantly went the distance in showing his love for God. He loved with all his heart, caring for his patients with the intensity of God's sacrificial love. He displayed integrity as he acted in accordance with his faith. And, as a physician, he offered to God his intelligence as a gift, rather than letting it (logically and rationally) keep him away from West Africa and the Ebola threat.

So, what about you? What would it look like, to love God: heart, soul and mind? The Reformation breakthrough of grace changed the world. Jesus' breakthrough of love could change your life. Amen.