Introduction

For me, picking a theme or a subject is the tough part. I appreciate Sunday’s with the lectionary giving me the readings. For a bible study I usually default to a particular book, although if pressed I can pick a topic. My problem with picking a topic is this. When you go looking for answers on a topic, you usually find what you want. So these Lenten mid-weeks are trouble. Even more than Advent because of the length.

And it has always struck me as odd that we spend two years attempting to teach the catechism at roughly the worst possible time in a child’s life to learn anything serious, and then it can just disappear. Even though Luther himself would point at the catechism and say you always return to it. So with Lent being something of a season of “returning.” The concept of one of the words translated as repent is to turn around and walk a different way. The Greeks were always in their heads. Their repent is to think differently. The Hebrew’s repent was turn around. So in a season of Repentance, we’ll return to the catechism.

And this year I intend to walk through the first section on the Word, most of the time on the creed. If you remember the catechism it has the six chief parts: 10 commandments, Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer; Baptism, Office of the Keys and The Lord’s Supper. It’s arranged that way because you have Word and then the Sacraments. Last year in Lent we walk through the questions for a fitting preparation for reception of the Lord’s Supper. So this year I thought we’d go back to the Word.

The First Commandment

And the Word in the Catechism starts with the law. The entire law can really be summarized in the first commandment. You shall have no other Gods. Luther asks the repeated question: What does this mean? And he goes deep: We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.

Why do I say deep there? Because Luther’s answer is an existential one, not a legalistic one. Pagan religion, and religions of the law – and ultimately I’d say that all world religions are religions of the law – don’t really care what you think or what you believe. They only care what you do. As long as you perform the right ceremonies at the right times. Or as long as you give the pinch of salt at the right shrine. The world can continue on its way. If you actually believed anything you were doing – don’t care, as long as you do it. You can see that in so many of our political squabbles. Nobody really cares what you believe, so long as you use the correct pronoun.

Now some of that is good wisdom. What you do over and over is what you become. A drug addict may not believe they are a drug addict, but if they take drugs every day. That observation is the foundation of all virtue ethics as well. How do you become courageous? By practicing courage – day by day. Confucius’s saying can also be found in Aristotle and most philosophers worth listening to: “At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from complexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right.” The formation of virtue doesn’t happen overnight.

But God is not ultimately after pure outward obedience. It is all over the prophets that the Israelites brought the required sacrifices. They said the prayers. But as Isaiah records, “this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men (Isa. 29:13 ESV).” Pagan worship is not what God desires.

What God wants is your heart. “He shows steadfast love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments.” Keeping the commandments isn’t nothing. But the keeping of them springs from love, from the desire to do so. Not from checking the box. Or even just from a lifetime of good parenting and continued formation.

There are so many things that compete for our love and trust, maybe even our fear. That’s Luther’s definition of what is actually your God – What do you love and trust above all things? And you can think of the common list: myself, money, power, fame. And you can think of good things taken to extremes: family, home, knowledge. Our hearts are idol factories. We give our love away so freely.

And I think that is ultimately the purpose of the law. That we might see ourselves rightly. That we don’t love the right things in the right order. That we trust our temporal things and lose the eternal. That we fear what might destroy the body, and care not a lick about who could destroy body and soul.

As our hymn summarizes, there are lots of good things about the law. It is good and wise. But its holiness condemns us all.

It condemns us, and gives us only one way out. The one who loved perfectly. Who loved His father enough to come to us. Who loved us enough to take our fate. Who fulfilled the law for us, that we might by his grace learn to love God and love our neighbor.