

More on the 10 Commandments – First Commandment (cont.)
+ Bishop Jon Anderson

I am the Lord your God. You shall have not other gods.

We should fear,³ love, and trust in God above all things.(Luther's explanation of the first commandment in Luther's Small Catechism)

People are often quick to run away from the word "fear" in Luther's explanation. They want to explain it as having a sense of "awe." That is true, but I have fear of God in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. In the Old Testament seeing the face of God was understood to be so overwhelming it would kill you. The more I learn about the history of our planet and watch the forces of nature work, the more I am aware of the power of God. [This is the hidden work of God that is always ambiguous with the cross and Christ to reveal what we need to know about God to us.]

In my article last week I wrote about problem we have with sin and making idols in our hearts and minds. Sin is bigger than we can admit or face. I fear God because I am a sinner. I fear God because we are sinners in community. Our sin is both the condition of our life and also takes particular forms. The second article of the Augsburg Confession lays it out. I underline the key part of the passage for me.

¹ It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. ² Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin² is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.⁶

³ Rejected in this connection are the Pelagians³ and others who deny that original sin is sin, for they hold that natural man is made righteous by his own powers, thus disparaging the sufferings and merit of Christ⁵

Art. 2 – Augsburg Confession - Tappert

"We are to fear" is hard to hear and follow because by our nature we are not able to have true fear of God as my underline above notes. Sin infects and impacts everything in my life. I fear God because I don't trust my own heart and feelings. I fear God because I don't trust my mind. I fear God because I don't trust my own actions. I fear they

³ On filial and servile fear see Apology, XII, 38.

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will not be more infected with sin than I could ever understand. Reinhold Niebuhr argues that our neighbors are able to see how our own self interest is more entwined with our best attempts to do what we think is right than we will ever perceive. When I am looking back I can see that more clearly than I can in the moment of action

So my great teachers like Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, John Douglas Hall, Karl Barth, Gerhard Forde, Martin Luther (and many other teachers I could name) all shared insights about God based on the revelation of God in scripture and particularly in Jesus Christ, but God is greater than anyone of them could capture. I think it was Karl Barth that said talking about God is like trying to paint a pheasant in flight. You can capture a moment but never the whole thing. God works in ways that we cannot see, comprehend or understand. Our concept of the Holy Trinity is a reminder of the complexity and wonder of our God who Luther reminds us commandment after commandment to “fear.” Yet God has chosen to reveal to us what we need to know in Jesus Christ “[W]e have... the manger, cross and empty tomb to hold on to and cling to.”

In this season of anxiety and fear in our culture and church, we are wise to remember the old prayer a pastor shared with me. “Dear God may I fear no one more than You. Amen. “

“We should fear, love...”

Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment he quotes Deut 6:5 - ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Mark 12:30.

Again it is a crushing expectation. Sometimes we are filled with doubt, frustration and uncertainty about God. It is hard to love in those dark nights of the soul. Luther at times struggled with hating God until he reached the liberation of his breakthrough about justification not being accomplished in our works but rather a gift of God’s grace.

I love God imperfectly, but never the less I love God for claiming me in my baptism to become a part of God’s family. I did not deserve it. Even more so I love God for choosing to reveal to us through proclamation in Word and sacraments what I need to know about myself, humanity and God through his Son, Jesus the Christ and him crucified. I love my God who loved humanity and each of us so much that God would go to such lengths as the cross to seek to break through the alienation, brokenness and sin so that we might know God’s healing, forgiving and redeeming grace in truth incarnate.

Mark Alan Powell wrote a book a few years ago called, Loving Jesus. Although our love will always be imperfect, we are called to love our God and love our Lord. He says, “spirituality means not just believing in God but loving God, and that such love cannot be adequately expressed with the prosaic language of theology and doctrine. It also requires the poetic voice of piety, which gives expression to the heart. (p. 11)

We should fear,³love, and trust in God above all things.

Our trust in God is also never perfect, but we have a trustworthy God who does not abandon us when we fail to be trustworthy or trust in God above all other things.

In Romans 5 there is this sweet promise

¹Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we ^[a]have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we ^[b]rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. ³Not only so, but we ^[c]also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces

³ On filial and servile fear see Apology, XII, 38.

perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

In Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession it says...

¹ It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, ^{2 2} when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. ³ For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.

This first commandment and Luther's short explanation are theologically loaded with themes. God's promise, "I am the Lord your God." lays the foundation for all that will follow.

"Holy God, you alone are the source of our love and faith. Curb our hearts from seeking satisfaction in our false gods which attract us. Take the night of our doubts away, that we find our rest only in you. We pray in the name of your Son Jesus, our strength and our all. Amen. Prayers Based on the Small Catechism p. 4.