

Sermon from October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014  
Preached by Pastor Brahm Semmler Smith  
Based on Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Matthew 22:34-46

Sisters and brothers made one through Christ, grace and peace be with you.

Who or what has a claim on you? What is it in this life can you say claims a piece of you? Think of those things in your life that have a claim on you. Things that are important to you, that you belong to, that you are a part of. Is it your parents? Your kids? Your school? Your job? Your sports team? Your house? Your stuff? Thinking larger: your community, your country, your world? What has a claim on you?

As you think about these, what does it mean to be claimed by them? What comes with being a part of them, or having them in your life? Does it mean you have responsibilities in return? If your parents claim you as theirs, do you have responsibilities back towards them? Or if you are a member of an orchestra, what duties do you have in return? Or if your house has a claim on you, what does that mean in how you treat it, take care of it, spend money on it? Or if you support a green and gold football team, do you heed the advice of your quarterback and relax a little bit?

Part of this claim question has to do with our identity. When asked the question, who are you, our answers are filled with aspects of our lives that we identify with, aspects that have a claim on us. My wife, daughter, parents, faith, Trinity Lutheran Church, the state of Wisconsin, the United States, the world, all of these have claims on me. All are a part of who I am, and all involve some sort of response from me in response to their claims.

On the other hand, what does it mean not to be claimed? What's it feel like to not get picked for the team? To not make the cut on a show? To not get the promotion or job? To not get the 2<sup>nd</sup> date?

In the movie "The Terminal" that came out a number years ago, Tom Hanks plays a guy named Viktor Navorski. While on traveling to the US from a fictional country in Eastern Europe, a war breaks out, a coup happens, and Viktor's passport becomes invalid because the country he had claimed as his own was no longer as it was. He was left in a sort of limbo, not able to leave the airport, not able to fly back home, and not able to speak any English. As I watch this scene, as he is figuring out what this means and what has happened, I find it heartbreaking. Viktor was unclaimed.

Today on confirmation Sunday, we affirm the baptisms of these young people you see in our midst. They come to remember their baptisms, and God's promises in those baptisms, but also to reaffirm the promises their parents and sponsors made, this time for themselves.

But it is not only they who affirm their baptisms. We too, remember our own baptisms, and in doing so, we affirm that we will never go unclaimed. In the waters of baptisms, God puts a claim on us that we are God's. We are God's. Say it with me, "I am God's."

In baptism, we are God's. In the waters and through the Spirit, God puts a claim on us for all time and eternity. Sealed by the cross of Christ forever. Jeremiah speaks about having a God who makes a claim on us. The prophet writes about the new covenant God will make with God's people. Jeremiah says, God will write God's law on our hearts, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. In perhaps

one of the most poignant verses in the entire Bible, we are told “I will be there God, and they will be my people.” And in baptism, we see that come to being. In baptism, God claims us. God tells us whose we are. And we are God’s.

So we are God’s. So what? Right, I think that is the question we run into now after we make these claims. Martin Luther famously asked often “What does this mean?” in his small catechism as he tried to explain the Lord’s prayer and 10 commandments and the apostles creed. He would ask, so what? Why is this a big deal? And of course Martin Luther being himself, he would go on and explain what he thought it meant.

So on this Reformation Sunday, when we Lutherans especially remember our brother Martin Luther and God’s ongoing work of renewal in the church and in our lives, I ask: So what. What does it mean for us to be claimed by God, and to carry the law of God within our hearts? What does it mean that God creates a new covenant with us? How are we supposed to respond?

While a bit more malicious than we are being in asking our questions this morning, the Pharisees ask Jesus in the Gospel lesson we read today how it is they are supposed to respond to God’s claim on their lives. What is the greatest commandment, Jesus? They were trying to trap him into saying something heretical or stupid or both, something they could condemn him with. And how does he respond?

He goes back and uses something that they would all know, something from the core of their faith and all the people of Israel. Borrowing from the ancient books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, he cites the following two commandments: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

What does it mean to be claimed by God? To be people of the covenant? How do we respond? Jesus tells us it starts with this: Love God. Love Others. Start with that, and go from there. Love God, and Love Others. And the fact that he puts the two together is no accident. To love God is to love others. To love others as much as we love ourselves is to honor God and the love God shows for us.

In answering this way, Jesus is making a statement. Not only is it we who are claimed by God. But our neighbor is claimed by God, too. How does knowing that your neighbor is claimed by God, how does that impact you? What does it mean to say I am God’s, and my neighbor is God’s? Even my neighbor who is homeless, or rich, or a bully, or a jerk, or gay, or straight, or my neighbor who has a Scott Walker sign in their yard, or my neighbor who has a Mary Burke sign in their yard. My neighbor who I grill with, my neighbor who I barely talk to. My neighbor who is a Muslim, or an atheist, or who lives on the other side of the world and lives on less than 1 dollar a day? What does it mean for us to know that we are claimed, and so are all these neighbors of ours? How is this call for love a blessing, and an incredible challenge?

Think about it in your life. How has being loved enriched your life? What does love do for you? When you remember that you are claimed by God, how does that provide you a source of comfort, inspiration, freedom, strength? Being claimed, being loved, it is a powerful force in our lives. And know, brothers and sisters, that all of you are claimed. All of you are God’s. Say it with me again, I am God’s.

So what? How are you going to respond? Amen.