

Parish of the Divine Love

Sermon Sunday October 25, 2020

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12; Psalm 1; 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8; Matthew 22: 34-46

The Great commandment of Love.

Today's Gospel celebrates the great commandment of love. To love our neighbor as God does, prejudices based on race, religion or color have to go. The revelation at Mount Sinai prompted a sense of fairness towards others, deeper than specific commandments. Jesus demonstrates a life of utterly unselfish loving and invites us to live the way of love.

Jesus' way of teaching and living and proclaiming the Good News was nothing like anyone had seen before. It was confusing, did not follow the same line as the ancestors before him had. And, perhaps not living in the way Paul would come to write about, some of the religious leaders were fed up. Matthew first records three of Jesus' parables, and then three of the religious leaders' riddles or trick questions to Jesus. The reading today comes during their last attempt to entrap Jesus in his own words; this is not the type of descendant they had wished for themselves!

According to rabbinic tradition, the accepted number of commandments is 613! These are the laws that the religious leaders are called to follow and enforce. And yet, they ask Jesus which is the greatest, and he tells them, simply, "Love God, love your neighbor." These two commandments will change the world. We can change the world, imagine a world without love. In his answer, Jesus follows the rabbinic law, the laws of his ancestors; "You shall love the Lord" is part of the Shema, the basic affirmation of Jewish faith. The commandments are familiar pieces of Jewish culture, teaching, and religion. But the way Jesus embodies them upends familiar expectations. "Whose son is he?" the religious leaders ask. "If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" "No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions." The religious leaders are stumped, and this is the part of the story where they begin to plot ways to remove the threat.

Despite their best attempts, those who feared Jesus' power were not able to suppress him. By being executed as a political martyr, Jesus demonstrated God's love in a way that would change his descendants forever. Today we are still calling ourselves followers of Christ. The mantle of Christ's teachings, life, responsibilities, and authority have been passed from one generation to the next over thousands of years. And in each of these lives, in yours and in mine, as it was for Moses and Joshua, God is present, and God will remain so throughout all times.

Christianity is the religion of love. It does not speak in eloquent clichés though. God's Word teaches, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 Joh. 4:10). Love is found in God before it is ever found anywhere else, for "God is love." (4:8). When we know the love of God in Christ who laid his life down for us (3:16) then, and only then, can we talk about our love: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (4:16). It is important to remember that Jesus' love is not just an example to follow, but the greatest love possible, the love which saves us from sin and death (Rom. 5:8). This distinguishes Christianity from any other religion that claims the virtue of love. The Christian religion is about God's love first and the giving of

that love through the cross of Christ. All our texts today suggest one clear and practical principle: loving God involves doing practical justice in our world. But even our superficially Christian society is full of people who show little respect for love or justice. Political and economic life is ruled by values far from those of the Gospel. Greed, and fierce desire for power and profit can be seen in our daily lives. We are closer to the paganism mentioned in Paul's letter than we may imagine. Today no less than then, the world is hostile to what Jesus represents, and it is hard for us to take a stand even on important issues of justice and compassion. Our Lord shows love of God and genuine love of the other as two basic aspects of the same call. There can never be a contradiction between the two, even though one may sometimes feel trapped in a situation where a particular law of Church or State seems to create a contradiction.

An approach to the second commandment about love could be by reflecting on how we love ourselves. Love of neighbor becomes virtually impossible in the age of self-hatred in which some fearful, discouraged people can find themselves. Loving the other as oneself only becomes possible if we have, or can grow into, a healthy, sane level of self-appreciation. Before you love others, you must love yourself. I'm not talking about self-centeredness or self-love, pride or selfishness. I am talking about finding out who you are in Christ and as a person, then coming to terms with that person. Knowing who you are is the first step toward wholeness and accepting that person is the second step. It is not important whether you say you love me. This thing is not going to work until you love you, because if you do not love, you are going to be looking to me to make up for that. You are going to expect me more than I can possibly give, in order to make up for what you lack in yourself. We get so busy trying to love our neighbors that we have no time to love ourselves. Then we get disappointed in ourselves and add to self-rejection when we find we cannot love them. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with your whole heart, and the second is to love your neighbor to the same degree you love yourself. You can only love people to the extent that you accept and love yourself. For Jesus, what God wants from us above all else is love. There is no genuine love of God unless it finds expression in love of our neighbor. Love of neighbor, in turn, presupposes a healthy self-love, recognizing and appreciating myself as fundamentally good, because I am created in the image and likeness of God.

As we receive this love from Jesus by faith the same love becomes a power in our lives. He who believes is "Born of God and knows God." (1 Joh.4:7). When our hearts are opened to the love of God by faith in Jesus we are overwhelmed and captured by it. Not so fully that we cease to be sinners that need forgiveness, but so that we can honestly say with St. Peter, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." (Joh. 21:17). So, if you are not sure how to love God, or your neighbor, or yourself, listen. In your soul, you will hear Jesus saying, It's OK, I'll show you how. **In Jesus' name, amen.**