

30th Sunday Ordinary Time Year "A"

October 25-26, 2014/ 7:00 pm, 12:00 Noon, 5:00 p.m.

Readings: Exodus 22: 20-26; 1 Thess 1:5-10; Matthew 22:34-40

Who is the greatest? Top ten lists are routinely given with respect to every conceivable category. Everyone wants to be the best it seems. This is perhaps why it may strike our modern ears as quite peculiar to hear a question, "Which commandment is the greatest?" We are stuck on the greatest moment in baseball, the greatest team ever, the greatest president, the greatest movie of all time, the greatest invention, the lists go on. But today we ask, "Which commandment is the greatest?" It is even more surprising given the answer—we are automatically thinking in terms of the 10 commandments—and the answer given is not one of the Ten.

In actuality, the question is placed in terms of the rabbinical understanding of the Law. In Judaism, there is a tradition that the Torah (the first 5 books of the OT) contains 613 distinct commandments in the Law, of which 248 were positive precepts and 365 were prohibitions. For example, some positive precepts dealt with belief in God and our duties toward Him, while examples of negative ones dealt with food laws, idolatry and related subjects. Those commandments were further divided by the Rabbi's into 'light' and 'heavy' commandments.

Splicing together two passages from the Torah, Jesus sinks those who dared to ask such a question. Instead of picking one of the 613 laws of the Mosaic code, Jesus quotes part of the *Shema*, the Jewish profession of faith that is found in Deuteronomy 6:5: *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* I placed that passage on my Ordination card, so beautifully does it sum up all of the Law. Here, Jesus is link this basic precept with another, quoting from Leviticus 19:18: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* The Deuteronomy passage was indeed a "heavy" in the Jewish Law, but the Leviticus passage was not as well known.

Jesus essentially elevated the 'light' commandment about one's neighbor into the centrality of the Gospel message. These two root commandments were precisely the ones the Pharisees keep breaking.

Jesus is teaching that to truly love God of necessity includes the love of neighbor. He links the two inexorably, and henceforth they have been so seen. This represents a major advancement in the teaching of Christ, and one by which we measure ourselves. He tops it off by saying that the entire law and the prophets is dependent on these two commandments—literally, it means that they 'dangle' on these two commandments.¹ The image is one of two pegs at equal height from which hangs a great bundle. Jesus is turning the image upside down. Jesus made the Law (Torah) and the prophets dependent upon, hanging from the double commands of loving God and loving one's neighbor.

Jesus both simplifies the faith, as well as challenges us to more. He simplifies it by paring it down to the very basics. However, to live the fullness of the faith is now more difficult than ever, because we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. We think about ourselves, we are concerned about ourselves, we pray for ourselves, and we look out for ourselves. Jesus challenges us to then do the same for one another.

New parents learn early on that the focus of their life is now squarely centered on their children—they learn this in a way I simply cannot know as a celibate priest. However, you are all my neighbors, and I am called to love you as I love myself. All of you—not just some. Every day brings with it plenty of chances to demonstrate care and concern for each other—and every day we must ask God for the power to love Him above all—with all our heart, soul, and mind.

¹ From the Greek word (krematai), producing an image "as objects hang on a nail." Cf. Gerhard Kittel *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:919-20

Bl. Mother Teresa once remarked to her biographers: What I can do, you cannot. What you can do, I cannot. But together we can do something beautiful for God.”

She also remarked:

“God told us, ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ So first I am to love myself rightly, and then to love my neighbor like that. But how can I love myself unless I accept myself as God has made me?”²

As you drive each morning to work on the crowded roads, search for a spot in the parking lots at malls, or find a seat in a crowded lunchroom at school—quietly ask yourself if you are indeed loving God with all that you have. Have you done something beautiful for God today, a good deed or an act of kindness or virtue? Ask if you are being patient with your neighbor, as you hope they are with you. Take the words of this simple Gospel to heart—it is much more difficult than it sounds! That is why it truly is the greatest of all the commandments.

² Mother Teresa of Calcutta Center (Official Site) www.motherteresa.org a good source for authentic quotations from Bl. Mother Teresa. Many quotations are falsely attributed to her, or significantly altered.