

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 25, 2020

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine/Crowley Center

On this last Sunday in October, there may likely be a variety of activities on our “to-do” lists, from raking the many leaves that have fallen from the trees, to taking a walk to admire the colorful leaves that are still on the trees, as we enjoy this beautiful Fall season. And it’s possible that as you rake the leaves with your kids, or take a walk with a friend to admire the beauty of the leaves, you might find yourself engaged in a lively discussion: perhaps about your favorite Sports topic, the latest developments about the current pandemic, or the intense political environment we’re experiencing as Election Day is just a little more than a week away---trying to determine: which team is the best, when the pandemic will end, or which candidate will win.

The Scripture Readings we’ve just listened to on this 30th Sunday of the Year also give us a lot that we could discuss. In fact in today’s Gospel, a fairly heated discussion has been taking place between Jesus and the religious leaders of the Jewish people---the Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. In today’s passage, it seems that they finally realized they had met their match in Jesus, and St. Matthew tells us that they had been “*silenced*”. Except, that is, for one, a “*scholar of the law*”, who decided to “*test Him by asking: ‘Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?’*”

Now that’s a pretty open-ended question. As you probably know, in the Jewish Law, there were 613 laws that had been given to the Jewish People from God through Moses and the Prophets. So, to ask Jesus which one of those more than 600 laws was the greatest would be like someone asking you to choose which of the thousands of leaves on the ground is the prettiest. Since we were already told that the Legal Scholar asked the question as a way of “*testing*” Jesus, he really wasn’t interested in the answer as much as he was hoping to lead Jesus into a trap; that whatever His answer was might discredit Him in some way.

As we know, Jesus’ answer was brilliant. Jesus chose two of those 613 laws---one from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:5), that they all knew off by heart, that they were to “*love God with their whole heart, soul, mind and strength*”; and He took the other one from the Book of Leviticus (19:18), with which they were also familiar, that they were “*to love their neighbor as they loved themselves*”. Jesus didn’t make up any new “laws”; His brilliance was in joining those two important laws into one, which He then said was the greatest Law of all the laws given by God. And that is what we now know as the Great Commandment.

But why is a Law about “Love” considered to be the greatest of all commandments---and therefore, the most important responsibility that any of us can have? Because, God IS Love! And if God, Who made us in His image and likeness, IS Love, then Love has to be what we strive to BE as well. We’re not supposed to only do loving things; we are also to be what Love is. Now, sadly, there are far too many times when the whole concept of “love” is lumped into a generic sense of “being nice” to people, or an activity that we enjoy deeply, or a food that is delicious. For example: “I love little Babies”, or “I love walking in the woods”, or “I love M & M’s” (which by the way I really do!).

Jesus teaches us what Love really is. And that’s why the greatest of all commandments is to “love God” and to “love our neighbor” and to “love ourselves” all in the same way, to the same degree, with the same intensity. There are to be no exceptions made for that “weird” person or

two in my life who gets on my nerves, nor for “those people” whom I consider my enemies; nor from those times when it’s too hard, or when I don’t feel like being “loving”. No exceptions; no exclusions; no excuses! So, if this is the Greatest Commandment, why is it, do you think, that the world seems to be filled with such animosity, division, hatred, violence, and intolerance for any opinions other than those who speak the loudest? We clearly have much to learn when it comes to loving as Jesus loves. Not only is this the “greatest Commandment”; it is also the “hardest”---the most challenging----the one that we’ll probably never, in this life, be able to master. But we must keep trying.

I really wish that the Scholar of the Law would have asked a follow-up question, such as “Master, how do we do that?” How do we love God (Whom we can’t see), and How do we love our neighbor (whom we can not only see, but who, at times, frankly we’d rather not see)? Many of the other 613 commandments of the Law answered that question of “how to love” and “what to do” and why we should do those things by following God’s ways rather than by following our own human tendencies. In fact, we heard that very teaching in today’s First Reading from the Book of Exodus, as the Lord was telling the People “how” to love, by commanding them not to molest or oppress an Alien; not to wrong any widow or orphan; not to extort a neighbor by charging them interest on a loan, nor depriving a neighbor of what belongs to him/her. And the reason behind those commandments is because God reveals Himself as “Compassionate”---another word for “Love”. And since God is compassionate, and since we are made in God’s likeness, then we too must be “compassionate”, that is, we must be “Love”.

While we know that God loves all people unconditionally, if God had a “favorite child”, that “Child” would be those who are the most vulnerable, the most marginalized, the most taken advantage of by others in the world. We are all too aware of the sad reality that in our world, there are those who suffer from back-breaking poverty, from inhumane violence, from indescribable living conditions, and from persecutions for various reasons. That should trouble and disturb us; that should cause us to not just pray for them, but to do what we can to change those conditions that cause that suffering. That’s a big part of what it means to “love our neighbor” as we “love God” and “ourselves”. That’s all part of the answer to “how” we’re supposed to live up to this huge, challenging, and difficult commandment.

During this pandemic, one of the unfortunate outcomes is the realization that “social distancing” is required to keep us safe; that we must wear masks, and keep apart from each other, to avoid directly or indirectly passing on the awful virus. That’s “social distancing” at its best. But haven’t we been doing that already in other ways in our lives? We choose to associate with those we like, we discuss with those we agree with, we spend time with those who share similar interests; on the other hand, we separate ourselves from those we don’t like, or who frighten us, or who look or think in ways that upset us. It’s very sad that we have figured out ways to let life go merrily by, oblivious, or “anaesthetized”, to the tremendous suffering of the poor, the marginalized, the vulnerable members of our society. That’s “social distancing” at its worst.

Jesus was once asked “*Who is my Neighbor?*” In response he told the Parable of the Good Samaritan which we all know so well---how the respected and upstanding Jewish individuals ignored the poor person laying on the side of the road; it was the Samaritan (one of those hated by the Jewish people) who was the only one to stop and help the individual who had been beat up and left for dead. At the end of that Parable, when Jesus asks “*Who is the Neighbor?*”, and they answer, “*the one who treated him with compassion*”, Jesus says: “*Go and do the same!*”.

Reflecting on that very point in his brand new Encyclical, “*Fratelli Tutti*”/“*Brothers and Sisters All of us*”, Pope Francis wrote: “*All of us have a responsibility for the wounded, those of our own*”.

people and all the peoples of the earth. Let us love every man and woman, young and old, with the same fraternal spirit of care and closeness that marked the Good Samaritan."

Jesus didn't just give us the answer to the question; He also showed us "how" to live the answer. At the Last Supper, Jesus got up from the table, took a pitcher of water and a basin, and went around and washed the feet of every one of his Apostles---and then asked them: *Do you know what I've just done? I have given you an example; what I have done, so you must do for one another (Jn. 13:12-14)*. And then, shortly after that, after Judas had left to arrange for Jesus' betrayal, Jesus taught them: *"I give you a new commandment: As I have loved you, so you must love one another."*(*Jn. 13:34-35*) Now, there's a challenge. If we want to see "how" Jesus loved us, all we have to do is look at the Crucifix; that is how we are to love one another--by sacrificing our own pleasures and conveniences for the sake of making others' lives better.

Yes, Jesus taught us the brilliant and correct answer to that very important question about which of the 613 commandments was the most important, but not just in words; Jesus taught us the right answer through the actions of His life---what He did. In today's Second Reading, St. Paul told the Thessalonians: *"Become imitators of...the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you become a model for all believers...."*

We are to imitate Jesus; but we are also to live in such a way that those around us---especially those closest to us---will imitate us. What kind of example are we providing to those in our lives upon whom we have the greatest influence? If you're married, what example are you giving your spouse? If you're a Parent, what example are you giving your children? If you're a single person, what example are you giving to your closest friends and family members; those who look up to you? If you're a young person, what example are you giving to your friends----are you strong enough to stand up for your convictions, or do you just take the easy way out and follow the crowd? In my own case, what example am I giving to all of you?

Jesus is the Example for all of us. That is also what we must be---not just to know the right answer, but to live that answer in our lives.

Yes, to live our lives following the Great Commandment, and according to the example of Jesus is a huge challenge, and one that we may not be able to do perfectly. However, that doesn't mean we should give up. We are people of Hope, renewed and strengthened by this precious Gift of the Eucharist and encouraged by God's Holy Word. Let us renew our efforts each day so that, with God's Grace, we can make our world a more loving place, one act of love at a time.