

Homily for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 3-4, 2018

Readings: Deuteronomy 6: 2-6; Hebrews 7: 23-28; Mark 12:28b-34

Preacher: Cathy Kamp

As Catholics of any age, we are most familiar with what Jesus said is the greatest commandment of all: love God, love neighbor. Simple. In fact, our lives as disciples of Jesus can be “simple” if we evaluate every action in our lives through this dual lens of loving God and loving neighbor.

I find myself even more appreciative of this simple commandment when I recall that, for Jesus, this was not the simple answer to the question he was asked in this Sunday’s Gospel: “Which is the first of all the commandments?” For centuries, Jewish people of faith had been debating two schools of thought. The first carried the fullness of the Hebrew creed: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone,” as we hear in today’s First Reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. This is the foundational sentence of the *shema* and is how synagogue services still begin. It is the ultimate declaration of the Hebrew belief in the one true God.

If Jesus had just said, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength,” most devout Jews would have agreed he answered correctly. But Jesus went further and brought together the first school of thought with the second. The second school of thought was championed by Rabbi Hillel, born 30 years before Jesus and active in the time of King Herod. He once claimed that the whole of the law could be summed up this way: “What thou hatest for thyself, do not do to thy neighbor. This is the whole law; the rest is commentary. Go and learn.”

Other rabbis and prophets had made similar statements previously. Micah, for example, said that the Lord requires us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

The novelty and brilliance of what Jesus did was to bring these two schools of thought together in one golden rule, not only to love the one true God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength but also to love your neighbor as yourself. He also took the second part to a new dimension. In the past, it had always defined neighbors as fellow Jews. Jesus put no qualifications on who the neighbor is. Therefore, Jesus' commandment included the Gentiles and all people. This, too, was new.

When the scribe in Mark's Gospel agrees with Jesus, he adds one more facet to the teaching and this captures Jesus' attention. The scribe says that living this dual commandment "is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." To this Jesus replies, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Jesus affirms that living our faith through a lens of love for God and love of neighbor is more important than our religious rituals.

What does this mean for us today? It may point to the very purpose of our Sunday worship, our celebration of the Eucharist, being the source and summit of our Christian discipleship. The liturgy is not the end point but is the source that sends us forth to glorify God by how we live life. In the liturgy we are formed through the Word of God from the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Gospel and the homily; we pray and praise God together in community; and we are transformed by Christ's gift of Holy Communion—all to help us love God and love neighbor more fully and completely.

It's easy to say the words that we go forth from Mass to love God and love neighbor, but what are the most challenging parts of that for each of us as we live out our faith in real time? Like the disciples of Jesus' day, we might reflect on what Jesus' inclusiveness means in our times. Do I love people who do not look or act or think like me? Do I love the co-worker who requires extra patience and

understanding? Do I love the family member who's an expert at pushing my buttons? Do I love people who vote for the other party? Do I love the kid who bullies my child at school?

Each day we have opportunities to use the first of all commandments to guide how we interact with other people, to help us in making decisions of greater and lesser consequence. This week, take this commandment to heart and try bringing it to your prayer each morning:

Lord, show me today how I can love You and my neighbor with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind and with all my strength. Amen!