

Year A 30th Sun OT (2020)

The Two Great Commandments --MT 22:34-40

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The scribe, a sincere man who asked Jesus if he could boil down the 613 commands of the Torah into one pithy summary got his answer. Then, true to his listening skills he got in therapy class 101, he repeats Jesus' words to show that he got his message and was really listening to him. Jesus is pleased that he has been heard and understood and the incident ends. Class dismissed. And there it is, this teaching, forever enshrined in our texts and in our liturgies. But it's a truth that needs to be enshrined in our lives.

It needs the dress, the clothing, the flesh and blood of everydayness to get into our hearts, into our conduct. I therefore ask you to listen with your heart.

Go back fifty or more years. It is the court martial after the My Lai massacre. Do you remember the incident? Lt. John Calley, accused of the massacre of innocent Vietnamese civilian villagers, is testifying. "An enemy I couldn't see, I couldn't feel and I couldn't touch: nobody in the military system ever described the enemy as anything but communism. They didn't give it a race, they didn't give it a sex, they didn't give it an age." Yes, anonymous, faceless life is cheap, except for the double edge commandment, "love of God, love of neighbor," which demands a face, race, gender, age; in short, the acknowledgment of the other as neighbor, a brother or sister in the Lord.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

My own failure in this matter was brought home to me when I was a college student in Baltimore and in my neighborhood there was a fair amount of ill and handicapped people who would beg. One man had no legs below the knees and he would sit outside the Walgreens I visited daily to pick up the paper. He would arrive in his wheelchair and, with powerful upper body strength, lift himself out of the chair and onto the ground. He did this in winter as well as in summer. A large plastic cup was placed between the stubs of his knees. I tell you I felt pretty good about myself because I always tossed him some money on my way out the store

Then one day as I was approaching the store, I saw a woman squatting down next to him and talking with great animation. As I turned to go into the store I heard her say, "So you haven't always lived in Baltimore...?" She was inquiring about his life, caring for him in a personal way. The money I later tossed into the cup somehow seemed impersonal, even demeaning. All those times, I realized, I never saw the man as a neighbor. I didn't even know his name or where he was from.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

One woman tells this story: "I am a forty-six-year-old woman, divorced, with three grown children. After several months of chemotherapy following a mastectomy for breast cancer, I was starting to put my life back together when my doctor called with the results of my last checkup. They had found more cancer, and I was devastated. My relatives had not been supportive. I was the first person in the family to have cancer and they didn't know how to behave toward me. They tried to be kind, but I had the feeling they were afraid it was contagious. They called on the phone to see how I was doing, but they kept their distance. That really hurt.

"Last Saturday I headed for the Laundromat. You see the same people there almost every week. We exchange greetings and make small talk. So I pulled into the parking lot, determined not to look depressed but my spirits were really low. While taking my laundry out of the car, I looked up and saw a man, one of the regulars, leaving with his bundle. He smiled and said, 'Good morning. How are you today?' Suddenly I lost control of myself and blurted out, 'This is the worst day of my life! I have more cancer!' Then I began to cry.

"He put his arms around me and just let me sob. Then he said, 'I understand. My wife has been through it, too.' After a few minutes I felt better, stammered out my thanks, and proceeded on with my laundry. About fifteen minutes later, here he came back with his wife. Without saying a word, she walked over and hugged me. Then she said, 'I've been there too. Feel free to talk to me. I know what you're going through.' I can't tell you how much that meant to me. Here was this total stranger, taking her time to give me emotional support and courage to face the future at a time when I was ready to give up."

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

When I was in another parish I saw the large van pull up in the church parking lot. A bunch of teenagers got out. They were part of our youth group. They got out with bedrolls and paraphernalia and, I must tell you, they looked awful. They looked like refugees. They were dirty and smelly, clothes messed up. They all looked like they just came from a brawl. It was the most awful bunch of kids you've ever seen, and they were ours. I said, "What's this?" "What's this," I knew, is that they just returned from Appalachia. There for one week, along with other groups, they had helped the people clean up and repair homes, and clear out tons of debris. Now they

were back home sitting on their bags, waiting for their parents to pick them up. I said to one of the boys, "Are you tired?" He said, "Man, I'm dead. I'm more than tired!" But then he added gospel words without realizing it: "But this is the best tired I've ever felt."

Why the best? Because he had loved his neighbor as himself and in the loving he had found God. I guess the old Persian proverb has it right after all:

**I sought my God,
my God I could not see.
I sought my soul,
my soul eluded me.
I sought my neighbor
and I found all three.**