

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time - October 29, 2017

This week's Gospel follows close behind the Gospel that we read last Sunday. It is the last of three questions put to Jesus by Jewish religious leaders who are trying to trick him into saying something that might get him arrested. This reminds us that today's reading is also telling us about the mounting tension between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem. This third question is asked by a Pharisee who questions Jesus about the greatest of the commandments.

So this particular question requires Jesus to interpret the Law of Moses. And as we know, the Mosaic Law consisted of the Ten Commandments, but in the Jewish tradition, there were many more additional rules, numbering over six hundred. Adherence to the Mosaic Law, for a devout Jew, was an expression of faithfulness to God's covenant with Israel. So Jesus answers the Pharisees' question by saying that all of the commandments can be summarized into two commandments: Love God and love your neighbor. Both of these are the parts of the religious tradition that Jesus learned from the Jewish community. And these continue to be the central aspects of the Jewish religious understanding. So Jesus' response to the Pharisee seems to propose a true connection between Loving God, which needs to find an expression in also loving our neighbor.

So the Gospel message today seems to be actually pretty simple --- Jesus reminds us the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor. At first glimpse, it seems that it doesn't get any more straightforward than that. And that might be true, if that's the only thing that we take away from today's Gospel. But if we truly think about it, today's Gospel is a little more than simply "Loving God and Loving your neighbor," because that kind of understanding will leave out maybe the two most important words in the whole reading, "...as yourself."

Yes – Jesus says, we need to "Love your neighbor, as yourself." But many of us believe that being a good Christian means that we shouldn't love ourselves much at all, or we will be looked at as being selfish and prudish. Isn't Christianity all about forgetting about ourselves? Isn't loving myself simply a sign of being too much of an egomaniac? Yet we need to understand that this really depends on exactly "what" we love about ourselves.

Today, we need to be reminded we are taught as Catholics that the image of God is confirmed upon us from the moment of our conception. God created us in such a way, that we should be able to recognize that each of us and our souls reflect God himself. This means each of us has a certain dignity, and a certain value and a certain worth that can never be diminished or taken away. This dignity that each of us has is based on the Church's moral teaching, especially when it comes to life issues, and it's why we Catholics reject the horrors of abortion and euthanasia.

So this dignity that God has given us is more than just a “mark” upon us. It speaks to what is possible, to our tremendous capacity for good, which is the God-given ability to be channels of his grace in all that we say and do. Let me say that again: “each of us has a tremendous capacity for good” - and that’s not because of anything we have done, but because God created us, and He loves us more than we can know, and He wants to share his very life and goodness with us, always.

And “that dignity” is what we are called to love in ourselves. When we are asked to love our neighbors as ourselves, we are being asked to see that same divine dignity in each of them. We are asked to see God’s image in them, and see the inherent dignity and worth of every single person. If we’re able to do that, then loving and being forgiving and merciful toward them, and being compassionate toward them is almost certain to follow. But if we can’t recognize our own dignity and the goodness that lies at the heart of who we are, how can we possibly share that same goodness with others? It’s nearly impossible to give to others what we haven’t even realized that we have received from God as His gift to each of us.

So we need to remember this: God made us this way, with great dignity and worth. Let’s be sure to recognize that God is within us, and that we need to love that about ourselves. And once we do that, we will recognize that about others, and then we can be assured that we’re on the path to having some very healthy, and loving, and generous relationships with God, and with all of our neighbors.