

October 29, 2017

Ex 22:20-26; 1 Thes 1:5c-10; Mt 22:34-40

It's all too easy to condense the Christian life and the message of Jesus Christ into a simple program of being good to other people. I have heard people say that what Christianity is "all about" is to discover how to help others. Jesus tells us that the life he calls us to - the life that God has been calling humanity to since the beginning - it is more than that. When it is limited to a simple social program it becomes just like any other secular philosophy and centers around doing good to "pay it forward", or to advance a specific social agenda. Certainly Jesus does have a social agenda - but it does not stop there. We hear today that the command of God is to love the other. Not to simply do good for others because "it is the right thing to do" but do good for others because you have learned to love them. We also hear Jesus say that we are commanded to love ourselves. This loving of self would lead us to a very unspiritual and unchristian pride and selfishness if it is not balanced by a genuine love for others, and tempered by the greatest commandment of all: to love God.

Jesus says: *You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment.* We need to love others, we have to learn to love ourselves as God loves us, but when we focus the whole of the Christian life on love and service to neighbor, on me and the others alone, we can neglect to love God. We can crowd God out of the picture and think that we can do it all by ourselves. We forget that without God we can accomplish nothing good that lasts - and without God's help we will be limited. God always blesses the good things we do, but we give the credit to God that is deserved. Without the love of God as a starting point we have an unbalanced love of self, and perform service to neighbor that is based on social philosophy, not on viewing the other as child of God and deserving of dignity, respect and love. We lose our perspective and ignore the reality of God in the world - a God who is rightly due respect, devotion and love. When we move the love of God out of the central place, we give our love to many things that are not of God - many "idols" of our own choosing - and our good is less effective. We begin to take care of ourselves and our wants more and more - eventually keeping resources of time and energy and wealth for us that could be helping others or providing for the worship and service of God.

St. Paul gives credit to the Thessalonians for having recognized the need to keep God in the central place and for turning from the idols of their own choosing. He credits them for having *turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to await his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead*. How do we serve God? How do we follow that first great commandment? I will propose three ways. First, give God some of the time and energy you have. Pray privately daily, read the Bible and other holy books, attend worship at Church, learn to think of God through the day, give sincere credit to God for God's part in your life. Take opportunities to attend some additional group prayer or study in the month. Learn to praise God with your heart and soul and mind - I mean really give to God your allegiance. Secondly, take the hand of Jesus as you walk in life. Turn to Jesus - God who lives among us - and in your need, ask the Father through Jesus the Son to send God the Holy Spirit to be a part of all the good things you attempt. Third, try to form a personal relationship with God. The powerful King of the Universe wants you to remember where you stand with respect to the Divine, but also wants to have a relationship of love with you. This can be a bit difficult since we don't see God, but try to develop that love of God in heart, and soul, and mind during your prayer and worship, and feel God's presence in a caring relationship as you walk with Jesus on the way.

Following the first of these two great commandments will lead to the second. Jesus tells us this second great commandment: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Loving God guides us to feel the love of God for us - and thereby learn to love ourselves as God loves us. From this love of God, and genuine love of self, we are prepared to reach out to others in a spirit of that love, to bring others into that love, to serve them out of love that is rooted on God and not simply in a social philosophy. Love of God, and that image of God in us, will draw us to praise God and then from that praise of God to service of neighbor as disciples of Jesus Christ. In the first reading we heard the prophet speaking God's loving response to those who are lowly, suffering, poor, and marginalized: *If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate*. Compassion - true compassion - comes from love, not from obligation or the latest social agenda. *Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself*. In this mystery of love all the law regarding service of God, care and respect for ourselves, and duties to others all make sense.