

July 14, 2019

Dt 30:10-14; Col 1:15-20; Lk 10:25-37

We tend to look out for ourselves. We do have to take care of and protect ourselves and those we care about. But there is more to life than that. While we do have to look out for ourselves, and as Paul says, *work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling*¹ - but also we have to consider what we owe God, and what our responsibilities are to others. In the Gospel a man comes to Jesus and says *Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* - on the face of it not a question to ask. Yet, we can learn a lot here from the answer that comes to his question.

Jesus doesn't give the man an answer right off - that's what he wants so he can trick Jesus. Jesus instead asks the man to answer his own question. The man, quoting Deuteronomy, says: *You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.* Good answer says Jesus. That man though he had it all figured out, he had a slick answer - and it was a good one - but although he was right in his answer, he didn't really understand what followed from that answer. So let's look at the answer, try to understand it more, and see how it might apply to us.

First he says - *You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind.* It is a demand of total love for God. In thoughts, actions, and in the deepest part of ourselves (which in Biblical terms is always represented by the heart). This is a love that seeks to spend time with the other (as you all are doing here today), it is a love that respects the other and wants to do right by them, it is a love that remembers who God is - and out of that love, follows what God has taught us. It is a weird thought to think that we can construct the way to eternal life ourselves taking pieces from any non-religious ideology and picking and choosing from any religious traditions and put them together in a way that is comfortable to us. When we do this, God is pushed to the side and ignored as we try to make God into what we want God to be - that is not love. We must love God for who God is, with all the things God has shown to us - things the Church has guarded and continues to pass on to us. Love of God means to follow and listen to God, not just follow our own tastes. We heard in the first reading of the good things to come from fidelity to God: *If only you would heed the voice of the LORD, your God, and keep his commandments and statutes ... when you return to the LORD,*

¹ Phillipians 2:12

your God, with all your heart and all your soul. ... It is something very near to you, ... you have only to carry it out. The man in the Gospel probably was an observant Jew and direct duty to God was probably not the area he had to grow in the most.

It was the pesky second part of the answer that was the sticking point: *[you shall love] your neighbor as yourself.* Oh, that's a bit more difficult. You can see the logic of loving the God who loves you unconditionally - but what about the many people who don't treat us well, or who we regard as outsiders. We do have to look out for ourselves (that's what the "as yourself" part of the command is about), but we need to look out for, and reach out to, our neighbors as well. You may be having the same thought the man in the Gospel had - *who is my neighbor?* He asks Jesus this question "to justify himself" - that is, he wanted to be told he was already doing all he needed to do. Actually he was really trying to find out what the smallest number of people he had to count as "neighbor," he wanted to know just how many people did he really have to worry about? Jesus answers this question with one of the most beautiful parables in scripture - the Good Samaritan. You have to understand that Samaritans and Jews lived in the same cities, yet each saw the other as foreign. In subtle and not so subtle ways pushed each other off and didn't love each other as much as they did people from their own group. In the parable, Jesus shows that people who are going to do their duty to God (those going to the temple) failed to follow God's command fully because they didn't reach out to another in need.

Our neighbors are not just those we already know, or those who live near us, or those we grew up with. Jesus shows us that this title extends to the person we never met before, someone who is from "the other" group, someone who does not look attractive, someone who may be awkward to approach as the man in the parable was. I challenge all of us to maintain our duty to God while reaching out to those who are our neighbors. We do this by engaging in parish ministries that serve others, by assisting those who are in need, by saying hello to - or even smiling at - a person who is joining us for Mass that you are not familiar with. Simple kindness goes a long way. I want to say a personal word of welcome to anyone who is new to worshipping God with us here, and challenge us all to make all our neighbors feel welcome - whether we know them from the past, or whether they are new to us - regardless of race, nationality, or history. To love God is to be true to God and listen to God when God calls us to love all of our neighbors as ourselves.