

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
October 25, 2020 Streaming Mass
30th Sunday of Year A Mt 22:34-40

In today's Gospel we are reminded that the essence of the Christian life is to love God, to love our neighbor, and just as surely, to love ourselves. What Jesus does is to join together the commands to love God and our neighbor, which are found in different places in the Old Testament, and He links them to the manner in which we love, in which we care about, in which we look at ourselves.

It should be clear at the outset that love, as it is spoken of in the Scriptures, is not a feeling. We cannot manufacture feelings; we can't turn them on and off like a faucet. Feelings are simply there; it's what we do with those feelings that make all the difference in the world. So, we are not commanded to like everyone whom we bump into on the street or on the subway, or the people we have to work with everyday. In regard to loving God, we have the example of Job in the Old Testament who is described as being angry with God, because of the misfortunes that occurred in his life, but still, despite all those negative feelings, Job remains faithful to God. And we may not always like ourselves for the things we have done, or have not done in our lives. So, if the command to love did mean that we were supposed to manufacture positive feelings all the time, feelings that simply are not there, then that would certainly be impossible. God may ask of us what at times is difficult, but God does not demand of us the impossible.

The command to love is not a matter of feelings, it is a decision—a decision to relate to God, to our neighbor, and to ourselves in a decidedly positive way. It is a decision to accept—to accept the reality of who God is, of who our neighbor is, and who we are, as well. It is to accept the reality of the world God has made for us. Woody Allen once said that “God is an under-achiever,” i.e., that God should have made a better world, than the one in which we find ourselves. But to love God is to accept precisely this messy world and to strive to do all that we can to make it better. It is to say “yes” to life, with all its pain and possibility. It means to be willing to engage life without always having to be in control, in control of one’s own life or the lives of others. To love our neighbor is to accept the reality of our neighbor with all of his or her imperfections, as well as their more positive aspects. It is to treat that person with respect and dignity, even if personally we don’t like that individual. It is to accept in the very same way those things about ourselves that we are disinclined to admit are part of our personality. In the words of the poet, W. H. Auden, our prayer should be, “Lord help me love my crooked neighbor, as I love my crooked self.” In

short, we are asked to love all the God loves—the planet we live on and all the people God has created; that we desire our planet and all its inhabitants should flourish, and that we do the best we can to make that happen.

The manner in which Jesus joins love of God, of neighbor, and of one's self makes it clear that somehow these three objects of our loving are all inter-connected. They are like three sides of a triangle in the sense that how well-developed we are in one aspect, in one of these ways of loving, of accepting, affects the way in which we are developed or undeveloped in the other ways of loving. How I look at God affects how I look at myself, and vice-versa, how I view myself affects how I view God and how I view other people. The manner in which I am willing to accept my own limitations and shortcomings will affect how I am able to accept the limitations and shortcomings of others. Sigmund Freud once said, "It is a good thing that Christians don't love each other as they love themselves, because if they did, they would go around killing each other." He meant that sometimes people can be filled with so much dissatisfaction and self-loathing, that they go around projecting their own dissatisfaction with life onto others. For such people, the easiest way to get the monkey off their own back is to be to throw it onto someone else's back.

A person's image of God can be so negative and judgmental, that they view themselves and others with the same harshness and severity. They are unwilling or unable to believe in, to accept, that God loves unconditionally, with no strings attached. So, they in turn are always requiring of others and of themselves that they measure up to a long list of demands and expectations, before these others and themselves can be judged worthy of respect. If we relate in a positive and healthy way towards others, appreciating the differences in all God's children, then we may also grow to accept all the qualities we possess, even those which we would want at times to disown. Again, with this image of a triangle, I want to suggest our attitudes towards God, neighbor and self are all interrelated—an inadequacy in one manner of loving will reflect itself in a diminished ability to love in the others; a growing appreciation and acceptance in one can lead to a growing appreciation and acceptance in another.

In today's Gospel Jesus makes clear what qualities we are to bring to that loving, to that decision to accept. He says we are to love with all our heart, soul, and mind. We are to bring the totality of who we are as human beings to that task of loving—our sense of compassion, our imagination, our intellect. The problem is that in loving, we may be engaging God, our neighbors and ourselves not totally but partially. We employ those aspects of our personality with which we are most comfortable to that task, but not those aspects of our personality that are less developed. We are accustomed to lead with our strong suit, but not with our whole selves. For example,

the kind of person who is very intellectual by disposition may not trust his or her feelings, may not be willing to go with the ways of the heart on those occasions when the heart, not the head, should be making the decision. Or the person who is rather emotional, may always pass judgment on the basis of how they feel about a person or a situation, going by their gut instincts, when they should just stand back and judge the appropriateness of those feelings, when they should not act impetuously, but take the time to reflect upon the situation and try to sort things out. Each of us is a composite of many different qualities, and we are called to develop all those capacities, all those aspects of our personality, not just our preferred ones, in meeting the challenge of the Gospel.

Again, God never asks of us the impossible, but we may be capable of doing more, of being more than we imagine. We are asked to bring ourselves in the totality of who we are to see that our planet flourish and that all God's creatures should flourish as well.