

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time A 2020

Last week, we heard of the Pharisees and the Herodians question Jesus of whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. This week, a scholar of the law comes to him with another question: “Which is the greatest commandment of the Law?” Unlike the previous encounter, there is no malice this time on the part of the scholar of the Law. The Jews had been arguing among themselves about this question. The Jewish Law during those days contained 613 different Commandments. 248 of them were favorable, the “Do’s” while 365 were things that ought not to be done, the “Don’ts”. As they argue about these trivial details, Jesus led them to the very heart of the matter. He told them: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and most important Commandment. The second greatest and equally important Commandment is this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This tells us that if we have the love of God within us, it should shine towards others around us. Love is meant to be shared, not to be selfishly kept to ourselves. The image of the cross clearly illustrates this to us. The love of God and love of neighbor is symbolized by the two beams of the cross. It is our call to embrace the vertical dimension of our relationship with God with the horizontal dimension of our relationship with others. As we reach up vertically to God with our prayers, we also need to reach out horizontally to our brothers and sisters in service. If we take away from the cross its vertical dimension or its horizontal element, detaching ourselves from either of those beams, we will never fully attain the love of God nor the love of neighbor in our life. Without the other, there is no sign of the cross, no sign of our faith, no sign of love for us.

I remember my experience growing up in the Philippines. I grow up in a home with a lot of rules and regulations. I can think of the rules of being at home before dinner so that we can eat together as a family. During dinner, we need to drop everything we are doing so that we can be present to each other. Do you have any house rules just like this at home? (Ask kids about their parents house rules)

Growing up, I had the difficulty understanding these rules and regulations. Sometimes they were overwhelming for me. Sometimes I saw them as prohibitions to do what I wanted to do at home. It seems to be restricting me to enjoy the things I like such as watching TV all night or constantly texting my friends on my cellphone. I knew they were put by my parents for my good. I knew that they were doing it because they love me, and they wanted the best for me. But still, how I wished then that they would not have minded me and let me just do what I wanted to do. Now, if they did not mind me and just let me do what I wanted to do; I wonder what would have I become? And so, I am still thankful to my parents for making my life then a little challenging at times, making it a little inconvenient at times or making it annoying at times so that I can grow better in my life.

Ironically, this also happens in our spiritual and moral lives. When we are about to do something wrong in our lives, our conscience will tell us about God’s do’s and don’ts and how we wished that they were not there. How we wish we just could do the things we wanted to do without any consequences and moral expectations. God has given His commandments for us because He minds us and God minds us because He loves us. God is looking after us because He wants the best for us. He does not want to control us nor hold us back with His commandments, but He wants us to grow and hold ourselves up as a person. That is why today he tells us: “Love God with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength and Love your neighbor just as yourself.” Jesus simplified the commandments for us. He didn’t make it as complicated as the 613 Jewish commandments. He wants us to return to the basics, to what is really important –

“Being kind and respectful to one another; Doing unto others what we want others to do unto us; spending quality time with our loved ones; setting our priorities straight.” It is in these simple acts of love where we experience God’s great love for us. Every day we must decide to express these simple acts of love because loving is a daily decision that we need to make in our life and relationships. Whether it be our relationship with God, with our family, with your children, with your spouse, with your friends: every day we need to choose to love even if it is inconvenient; we need to choose to love even if it can sometimes hurt; we need to choose to love even if we don’t get loved in return. If we look back into our lives, we would realize that the happiest moments that happened to us and the people around us are the moments when we get out of ourselves to love others and the saddest moments that happened to us and those around us are the moments when we let others down because of our own personal interests and wants.

All of us want to be happy in our life. All our choices and decisions are geared towards this goal. As we work on this goal, let us remember that the depth of our happiness rests on our answer to the scholar’s question today, “What is the greatest commandment for you? – to love just ourselves or to love God and our neighbors just as ourselves?”