

Fr. Curtis Miller    October 24-25, 2020    Homily for the 30<sup>th</sup> Sun. of Ordinary Time

What more can we say? Jesus summarizes the greatest commandment so perfectly that it's hard to say more. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There's nothing that we can add to this perfect answer. Yet it can help to consider it more deeply.

First of all, it's important to set it in context. The Law was central to the life of the Jews. The first five books of the Bible, called the Torah or the Pentateuch, contain the Law, God's rules for how His chosen people are to live. We're all very familiar with the centerpiece of the Law: the Ten Commandments. But there are also many other laws, governing every aspect of life, from liturgies and ritual purity to dietary and hygienic prescriptions. In total, there are 613 rules in the Law of Moses. So the question that the experts in the Law asked was not as simple as it might seem. To single out any one law could seem to neglect other laws. These experts saw every law as interconnected. Selecting just one risked having it all fall apart, like unravelling a sweater by pulling out the wrong thread. Yet Jesus was deftly able to answer their question in a way that covered all the commandments, getting to the heart of them without losing anything essential in the process.

Often when we think of God's commandments, we think of it as a list of "Thou shalt not"s, negative prohibitions of various bad actions. Interestingly though, Jesus chooses to answer this question *positively* with what we *should* do, namely, love God and neighbor. Everything else is summed up in these two commandments.

Now, if we were to be picky, we might notice that while the experts in the Law asked Jesus to choose one commandment, He responds with two. So which one is more important? The truth is, these two commandments are really one because if we do not love God, then we cannot truly love our neighbor, and if we do not love our neighbor, then we cannot truly love God. They mutually reinforce each other. Each person is created in God's image and likeness. As St. John writes in his first letter, if we claim to love God, but hate a brother or sister, then we are liars. Thus, we must recognize the divine likeness within each person, and love God through them, no matter how obscured that image is by that person's sins and weaknesses. And truly loving them, we won't leave them in that state of sin, but rather work to help them better reflect the image of God in their lives.

Now let's be clear on what love is. It's not just a warm feeling, but something deeper. St. Thomas Aquinas says that it is the conscious choice to will the good of another. In other words, we want what's best for that other person, and we're willing to give of ourselves to help that person attain that good.

If we pay careful attention, we might also notice that Jesus implies one other commandment in His answer. When Jesus says that we are to love our neighbor *as ourselves*, this implies that we ought to love ourselves, too. But this must be properly understood.

We might be tempted to think that neglecting ourselves is somehow selfless. It's not. God has given us our lives as a gift to be taken care of well and appreciated. As Jesus says, He came so that we might have life, and life in abundance. If we are able to live the abundant life given by Jesus, then we will be able to love ourselves and be better able to love other people. It's not truly selfless to hate oneself, put oneself down, and be mooney.

The martyrs who laid down their lives in love for God and other people were joyful, life-loving people. Consider St. Maximilian Kolbe. This Polish Franciscan friar was joyful. He never made a show of being a martyr, being glum or miserable. Because he loved God's gift of life, he was able to offer his life in exchange for a fellow prisoner in a concentration camp during World War II.

Life is God's gift. Let's appreciate it, live our lives well, and love ourselves. That way, we will be able to love our neighbor better.

Many of the people whom we struggle to love, perhaps don't love themselves. They externalize and project their inner pain onto other people, including you and me. Let's choose to be compassionate toward those who hate us, to respond to hate with love. Perhaps that witness of true, Christian love is exactly what they need to break out of their self-loathing and experience the joy of life.

The world often tells us to put ourselves first, and only later think about other people or God. But this selfishness is a small and a lonely way to live. Jesus tells us to do the opposite. If we first love God, then our neighbors, and then ourselves, then our hearts will be expanded and we will experience true joy in life.