

Fr. Curtis Miller June 27-28, 2020 Homily for the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus' command that we must love Him more than our parents, spouses, children, and the rest of our families is a hard teaching, one that might strike us as impossible. But as you might have guessed, there is a deeper meaning to what Jesus is asking. Before I explain that nuance, let me tell you a story that sheds some light on this teaching of Jesus.

A few years ago, I read a beautiful book, called *A Severe Mercy*. It's a memoir by a man named Sheldon Vanauken, reflecting on his marriage to his wife, Jean Davis. In many ways, they were a peculiar couple. They called each other by nicknames, Van and Davy, taken from their last names. They were poets and academics who travelled widely and studied at universities around the world. Van and Davy were also madly in love, maybe verging on the obsessive. They met as young college students on a winter's night and fell deeply in love right away, realizing their many shared interests and how well they complemented each other. Yet they both agreed that they would only continue their relationship if by spring they loved each other more, saying that if love wasn't always growing, it was bound to die. Sure enough, in the spring, they did love each other more, and they got married only a few months later.

Van and Davy called their love "the Shining Barrier," imagining it like a fortress that held them together. Behind this wall, they would do everything together, share the same friends, work at the same places, enjoy the same hobbies, and read the same books. They had to share everything, and anything they couldn't share was shut out of their lives. While this might sound stifling, Van and Davy were so perfectly suited for each other that it came naturally.

One of the views that they shared was their disbelief in God and their rejection of organized religion. That was until they went to study at Oxford University in England. There they met C.S. Lewis (who, I know, keeps making appearances in my homilies). He had also previously been an atheist, but his studies and experiences convinced him of the truth of the Gospel, and he had converted to Christianity. Davy began to learn from C.S. Lewis, studying his writings and other books he recommended, and she quickly became convinced of the truth of Christianity and converted, too.

This was the first crack in their "Shining Barrier," something that they did not fully share and agree upon. Eventually, Van became more open to Christianity, seeing his wife's enthusiasm for it, and finally he converted as well, though perhaps he was a little less enthusiastic than her. Having agreed to always read the same books, he found himself reading the Bible alongside his wife. One of their favorite passages came from the second half of today's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, the line about the one who gives a cup of cold water to a disciple receiving a reward. They would each make a point of asking the other for a cup of water, often at inconvenient times, first as an

inside joke, but it grew into a tender expression of love. He wrote that “We considered it a very great courtesy to ask for the cup, as well as to fetch it.”

Their love story seemed idyllic, and in many ways, it was, until Davy became very sick with a liver disease, perhaps Hepatitis. Van tirelessly cared for his wife during many months of sickness, but then she died. He was devastated. She had been his whole world; they had literally done everything together, and now she was gone.

It was then that he turned more seriously to the faith that had meant so much to his wife, and which had given her the strength to endure her illness. Ironically, it was only in her death that he was finally able to share faith with her fully. In losing her, Van came to love God more, as much as his wife had. Only when he loved God more could he love her perfectly, no longer with any possessiveness or selfishness, just pure love. Even though she had died, he felt her presence more strongly and loved her in a better way. He reflected that he and Davy had been right at the beginning of their relationship, love had to be always growing, otherwise it was dying. Life in this world could not contain the love they wanted to have for each other. Only in God, Who is love, could their love fully flourish. He reflected that their love “had to be crucified before it could be resurrected into something eternal.” And love of God had to come first, and be always growing, otherwise that love would die, along with all other loves. This experience of suffering and loss, leading to a deeper love for God, and a truer love for his late wife, is the “severe mercy” which gives the book its title.

Perhaps considering the story of this one couple can help us better understand what Jesus is asking when He commands that we love Him more than everyone else. It is not that He commands us not to love our family, but rather that we entrust our hearts to Him first, so that He can purify and transform our hearts. Only then can we love our family members with true, perfect love, a love that is eternal, not bounded by the limits of this world and life. If we love Jesus first, He takes nothing from us. Rather, He fills our hearts with a greater share of His eternal love, so that we can carry that back to all of our loved ones in abundance.