



Homily for 7/14/2019

15th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C

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Who Is My Neighbor

In today's Gospel we receive a great summary of the whole project of Divine Revelation. Here it is: Love God with all your heart, and with all you soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." In another passage Jesus confirms this as the whole of the Law and the Prophets; that is, the summary of Divine Revelation. But where does it come from?

"Love God" comes from Deuteronomy 6 - the *Shema Israel* - the first creed of Ancient Israel: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

"Love your neighbor" comes from Leviticus 19: "You shall not take vengeance or bare any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

But then a question arises. It would seem that there is an exclusivity to this second love; i.e. there is a clarification to love only the "sons of your own people" as neighbor. But in other passages surrounding it, there is an extension of this love to hired servants, the deaf, the blind and the poor. So, there was a lot of discussion among the scholars of the Law as to who exactly was the neighbor whom I am commanded to love. This is the scholar's question to Jesus: "Does loving your neighbor mean exclusively loving only the 'sons of your own people' - that is, the Israelites - or is it more broad definition?"

The parable is Jesus' answer, and it comes in the startling suggestion that even a Samaritan, decidedly not a 'son of your own people', was neighbor to the man on the side of the road. A Samaritan was someone who was outside the family of Israel. The Samaritans were the descendants of the Assyrians who had conquered Israel in the 8th Century B. C. For that reason, they were hated by the Jewish people and thought to be quite 'un-neighborly'. In this very challenging parable, the Samaritan, who is hated by the Jewish people, including the one in the ditch, goes above and beyond to help one who is his enemy, and this is precisely what makes him neighbor.

Now meditation on this parable reveals something even more profound. Jesus puts *himself* in the place of the Samaritan and we are the person in the ditch. So says St. Augustine: "The whole human race, you see, is that man who was lying on the road, left there by bandits half dead, who was ignored by the passing priest and Levite, while the passing Samaritan stopped by him to take care of him and help him.... In this Samaritan the Lord Jesus Christ wanted us to understand himself." (Augustine, *Sermons* 171.2; trans. E. Hill, cited in Gadenz, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 213).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "Christ died out of love for us, while we were still "enemies" (Rom 5:10). The Lord asks us to love, as he does, even our *enemies* - to make ourselves the neighbor of those farthest away, and to love children and the poor as Christ himself. (CCC §1825)

The First Reading from Deuteronomy reinforces this simple message by basically saying, "you know what 'being neighbor' means - it is not too far off for you to grasp. The Law of Love is written in your heart - it is the golden rule of 'do unto others what you would have them do to you.'" This stems from a realization that we are only doing what we hope and expect God to do towards us. When the roles are reversed, when we are the enemy, we hope for mercy. When we realize that we have become the enemy of God through our sins and our failures, we



beg for mercy. And He gives it. That is why He teaches us to pray, ‘forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us!’

The Christian way does not expect us to have lovey-dovey, nice feelings for our enemies and to think that their bad ways are the best ways or to condone their error. But at the same time there is a very clear expectation that we show kindness. We must will the good of the other even if the other is evil or perpetrates evil upon us. And, more importantly, we must do good towards them. There is a right way to fight against injustice and hatred. God loves the sinner, while hating the sin. God desires not the death of the sinner, but rather his conversion, that he may live! So, when we confront evil, which we must, we must do it with the effective weapons of the Gospel: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Don’t fight fire with fire. Fight the fire of evil with the living water that comes from Jesus. It starts right here at this altar. He lays down His life for us. It continues at this altar rail, where we humbly bend the knees of body and heart to receive Him. It continues when we are sent back out the doors to quench the thirst of those bloodied by the world, even if they be enemies of Christ and the Christian way.

“Love your enemies” is the most challenging of Jesus’ commandments in the New Covenant. He is only asking us to do what He has done for us. Go and do likewise.