Born in 1579, Martin De Porres experienced a lot of prejudice in his life, but he did not let that embitter him. If Christ could humble himself to become like a slave, then Martin would humble himself overlooking the blindness of racial prejudice. His father was a Spanish nobleman, his mother a black slave woman who had been set free. Being of mixed race, he was prevented from entering the Dominican religious order because of a local law limiting the opportunities for people of mixed race. To their credit, the Dominicans looked at the content of his character and saw an exceptional human with a great gift of caring for the sick.[i] Martin served as a Third Order Franciscan until such time as he was allowed to profess vows as a Dominican lay brother.[ii]

Martin De Porres was canonized a saint in 1962 by Pope John XXIII. From the Pope's homily that day, we easily see why our Gospel for the Memorial of this Saint highlights the two most important commandments. "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment" (Mt 22:37-38).

When Martin had come to realize that Christ Jesus suffered for us and that he carried our sins on his body to the cross, he would meditate with remarkable ardor and affection about Christ on the cross. He had an exceptional love for the great sacrament of the Eucharist and often spent long hours in prayer before the blessed sacrament. His desire was to receive the sacrament in Communion as often as he could.[iii]

So intense was his prayer before the blessed sacrament and so great was his love that his feet literally left the ground. "He was known to levitate in ecstasy in front of the altar, but he also subjected himself to many severe penances."[iv]

The second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself (Mt 22:39). Arguably, one may say that Martin loved his neighbor more than himself:

He honestly looked on them as God's children and as his own brothers and sisters. Such was his humility that he loved them even more than himself, and considered them to be better and more righteous than he was. He excused the faults of others. He forgave the bitterest injuries, convinced that he deserved much severer punishments on account of his own sins.

Like the Good Samaritan, he saw suffering and his heart responded with care and compassion:

Finding a poor man on the street, bleeding to death, Martin took the man to the priory, and to his own room, in order to care for him. The prior chastised Martin, but he humbly replied: "Please forgive me, for I did not know that the precept of obedience took precedence over that of charity." Impressed by his response, the prior gave Martin permission to care for the sick and the poor in whatever way he thought best.[v]

Jesus teaches, "unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me" (Mt 18:3-5). God granted Martin a spiritual wisdom and the learned came to him for guidance. Bishops and theologians sought his advice and were impressed by his answers. With great humility and a charitable heart, Martin fed the hungry, offered drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and cared for the sick. And where he found a great sinner, he went after the lost sheep in the same way the Good Shepherd would.

As Pope John XXIII said, "It is deeply rewarding for men striving for salvation to follow in Christ's footsteps and to obey God's commandments. If only everyone could learn this lesson from the example that Martin gave us."

i catholicnewsagency.com/news/apparently-st-martin-de-porres-only-had-two-teeth-when-he-died-22308
ii opwest.org/martindeporres/
iii digitalcommons.providence.edu/exhibits_dominican/50/
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