Dear Friends,

The Holiness Challenge

One of the striking features of the Gospel narratives is that all the four Gospels shift to a high gear of conflicts and confrontations in the last week of Jesus’ life. Jesus was confronted by several groups of religious leaders—first by the chief priest, scribes and elders who had questioned His authority; then by the Pharisees who tried to turn the people against Him by ensnaring Him in a controversy; and finally, by the Sadducees, who tried to make Him look foolish with trick questions. In each case, Jesus responded with a wisdom and authority so powerful all opponents were stunned in amazement. They had come to battle wits with the Son of God; and lost in every encounter. A scribe, who believed in both the written Law and the oral tradition, was pleased to see the defeat Jesus had dealt to the Sadducees who had presented for solution the hypothetical case of a woman who had married seven husbands. Who, they had asked Jesus, would be her husband in the world to come? To the scribes, the Mosaic Law was the greatest, fullest, and most perfect revelation of God’s will that could ever be given. However, in the Judaism of Jesus’ day there was a double tendency: to expand the Mosaic Law into hundreds of rules and regulations and to condense the 613 precepts of the Torah into a single sentence.

The summation of the Law comes from Deuteronomy 6:4. It is called the Shema Israel. This was the ancient prayer that was and is said by the Jewish people every morning and every evening. It is a prayer that they kept in a packet at their doors so they could take it with them wherever they go. “Shema Israel, Hear O Israel, You shall love the Lord with your whole heart, whole mind and whole soul.” Jesus added something to that prayer, a part of another verse from another book of the Hebrew Bible. From Leviticus 19:18, Jesus added: “and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The great contribution of Jesus is that he combined the originally separate commandments and presented them as the essence of true religion—the holiness challenge! True religion, Jesus says, is loving God by loving service. That is, the only way a person can demonstrate real love for God is by showing genuine, active love for neighbor. The “great commandment in the Law” is threefold: We are commanded (1) to love God, (2) to love our neighbor, and (3) to love ourselves. We are to love God, for it is in loving Him that we are brought to the perfection of His image in us. We are to love our neighbor and ourselves as well because both of us bear God’s image, and to honor God’s image is to honor Him who made it. We are to love our neighbor and our self as the pathway to the love of God: God gives us our neighbors to love so that we may learn to love Him.

Jesus’ simple statement embraces everything we need to do to serve God. And yet, it demands a radical change in our lives and a radical change in our whole perception of religion. Every action of our lives is included in this law. We are all made in God’s image and likeness. We are called to reverence the Lord in the many ways in which he is present in his world. When we love other people, we are loving people who themselves are unique reflections of the presence of God. We cannot love God and hate others. Sometimes people say that they pray hard, they come to Church often, but they don’t feel they are making any progress in their spiritual life. Maybe we all feel this way at times. Perhaps, when we feel this way, we need to ask ourselves if we are at peace with other people. We may not like someone, but if we are full of hatred for someone, we are destroying the love of God within us.

Be blessed,
Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.
FIRST READING
“Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.” (Dt 6:5)

PSALM
I love you, Lord, my strength. (Ps 18)

SECOND READING
But Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him. (Heb 7:24-25)

GOSPEL
And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him,
“You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mk 12:34)

GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

Centuries of God's devoted people have found this prayer on their lips: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!” The fundamental prayer has been laid as the cornerstone of many spiritual lives. Where did you learn how to pray or did you? Maybe there is a wisdom figure in your life who inspired and guided you by the genuine, holy simplicity of their lives. His or her example may have led you to God and taught you how to pray. Or perhaps you discovered this art on your own after stumbling over yourself enough times and finally realizing it was time to reach out to Someone greater than yourself. There is a timeless truth that we not only tend to forget, but may have never learned. There is only one God, the Lord alone! As a result, we often worship other gods rather than the One true God. Everything in our life gets distorted and we find ourselves lost and off center.

If we haven’t learned it yet, there is a life lesson at the top of all of the possible lessons to be learned. There is One True and Eternal God who alone has a solitary claim on us and must be loved with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Until we learn this primary lesson, we run the risk of getting distracted and sidetracked. We will also never really figure out what is at the heart of the relationships we share with the other human beings on this planet with whom we share life. That one primary lesson will teach us the second most valuable lesson: that we must love our neighbor as ourselves. You cannot have one without the other. The presence of God in the core soul of each one of us requires that all of our relationships work together. This truth is at the heart of the Gospel.

If every human being, each in their own way, could stumble upon and genuinely embrace this truth, look how different life would be! Our priorities will immediately shift from “I and me” to “us and we” and we will develop a more inclusive vision for our brothers and sisters. Concerned not only about my own wellbeing and happiness but also that of our brothers and sisters, humanity stands a chance at succeeding in the struggle with injustice, abuse, inequity, violence, war, entitlement, and privilege. It seems that getting to this point has been at the heart of the Gospel and the kingdom of God from the moment Jesus first started to preach. It's a wonder why, then, why so many centuries later, we have still failed to achieve his vision. Maybe we just haven't learned our primary lessons yet.
The first reading, Deuteronomy 6:2-6

The opening line “Listen, O Israel” does not simply mean to let the sound waves enter your ears. Instead, the word “listen” here means to allow the words to sink in, provide understanding, and generate a response. In other words, in Hebrew, “hearing” and “doing” are basically the same thing, but how should Israel respond to hearing that the Lord alone is their God? “Love the Lord your God.” In this context, love isn’t simply the warm, fuzzy, emotional energy we feel when we like someone. In the Bible, love is action. You love someone when you act in loyalty and faithfulness. For Israel, to love meant faithful obedience to the terms of their covenant relationship. Those terms are the laws and commands that will make up the body of the book (Deuteronomy 12-26). Obedience to these laws was never about legalism or trying to earn God’s favor. Obedience in the Old Testament is about love and listening. If an Israelite loves God, it will make it easier to listen and absorb his teachings and guidance. This is why the words “listen” and “love” are so tightly connected and repeated through these opening speeches of Deuteronomy.

The second reading:  Heb 7:23 - 28 This passage from Hebrews highlights the singular character of the priesthood of Jesus and of the sacrifice which he offered. This the author does in situating the action of Jesus against the background of its counterparts in Israelite cult. In former times there were many priests because human mortality prevented any of them from continuing indefinitely (v23). It is not so with Christ who as priest has an eternal mission. Having entered the heavenly sanctuary, he makes continual intercession on behalf of his people (v24f). This intercessory power is related to the ongoing and permanent character of Christ’s single sacrifice. The offering of Christ on Calvary has taken on transcendent significance with both priest and victim continuing in their sacrificial role (9:11 - 14; Rom 8:34). The result is that people of any generation have their intercessor already in place and have no need of further sacrifices. Christ, the high priest, sinless and undefiled (4:15), is the heavenly mediator now distanced from sinners. Unlike the high priests of the past, who had to offer sacrifices repeatedly for themselves and for the people, Christ remains the permanent priest and offering.

Gospel Insights The question put to Jesus was one frequently directed to the rabbinic teacher, requiring some prioritization of Judaism’s 613 precepts (v28). Departing from the other synoptics, the Marcan Jesus quotes the Shema from its beginning (v29). Its meaning in the Greek text falls more strongly on the note of God’s unicity, a conceptual monothelism stronger than in the original Deuterononomy. Jesus’ response joins Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 as a summary of the entire law (v30f) The total human response to God in love must be accompanied by love of neighbor, a linking of the two precepts which is distinctly Christian. Jesus concludes by affirming this law’s superiority to all others. Only in Mark does the inquirer repeat Jesus’ teaching and address him as “Teacher” (v32f). He adds his own postscript in recognizing the teaching’s superiority to forms of cultic and ritual expression (v33). The subtle contrast here is between cultic formalism and a truly internal religious spirit. Jesus acknowledges the man’s good intentions which indicate his proximity to Christian discipleship (v34). At this important juncture all further questioning of Jesus ceases. Confrontation immediately puts conversation on guard. We are ill at ease from the start. Friendly discussion, on the other hand, leads to mutual enrichment. The great commandment of love is reported in basically the same form in all the synoptics. But only Mark places it in a friendly framework. It almost seems as if the precept itself is already at work in the exchange between the participants. In carefully repeating Jesus’ words, the scribe is making them his own. He is convinced of their truth and his respectful and kindly tone reflect it. So often our tone of voice or our body language convey an attitude which sets the stage for misunderstanding and hurt feelings. On the other hand, a gentle inflection marked by respect elicits a ready response. It is hard to escape the fact that the great commandment becomes flesh in daily conversation, in the considerate gesture, in the soft-spoken word.
America’s Four Gods

How do you think Americans today see God? In 2006 Baylor University published a survey of attitudes toward religion, and one of the topics was people’s view of God and how it affected their values, actions and attitudes. Two professors from Baylor took the data and wrote a book titled, America’s Four Gods. They found two key areas of belief among the respondents. First, some saw God as distant and uncaring while others saw Him as engaged and active in people’s lives. Second, some thought He was only loving and never judgmental while others believe He does express His anger toward people and nations in this life. Within these two broad categories, the authors identified four basic attitudes toward God:

1) Authoritative – 31%. The Authoritative God is very involved in the world to help people and judges evil in this life. Still, He is loving, and is seen as a Father-figure.

2) Benevolent – 24%. The Benevolent God is very involved in this world to help people, but does not feel anger toward wrong-doers and does not judge anyone.

3) Critical – 16%. The Critical God does not involve Himself in the affairs of this world or its people, but does take careful note of how people live and judges them in the afterlife, holding them to account for evils done.

4) Distant – 24%. The Distant God is more a cosmic force or Higher Power than a person. This God created everything but is no longer engaged with the world and does not judge its inhabitants. Atheists comprise about 5% of the population. (P. Froese & C. Bader, America’s Four Gods, Oxford, 2010) — If you examine those statistics they tell us that 70% of the people in our society either believe that God is out there somewhere, but detached and uninterested. Or is like the bellhop at a hotel, there to pick up the baggage of life that’s too heavy for us to hoist, but the rest of the time can be politely ignored if we feel we’ve got things well in hand.

(Rev. Ken Larson).

QUIZ TIME

1. What did Moses tell the people of Israel to do?
A) Love God with all their hearts   B) Obey all of God’s commandments   C) Keep his words in their hearts   D) All of the above

2. What was the sacrifice Jesus offered for us?
A) sheep   B) A dove   C) Money   D) Himself

3. What question did the scribe ask Jesus?
A) What he must do to have everlasting life   B) Where he should go for Passover   C) Which commandment is most important   D) Why God became a man

4. What did Jesus say we must love God with?
A) All our hearts   B) All our minds   C) All our strength   D) All of the above

5. What must we love our neighbor as?
A) A friend   B) A brother   C) A stranger   D) Ourselves

“Loving Neighbor” - Today our focus should be on Climate? Racism? Starvation? Equal Opportunity? Any Other?

What is your idea about Eternity? How does it impact your daily life?

How do we show love for God? Are most of the Ten Commandments about loving our neighbor.