

In the gospel, Jesus gave us the two great commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” and love your neighbor as yourself. All other commandments and laws of the church—whether they are the Ten Commandments or the 1752 codes of canon law—all fall under one of those two great commandments. Today I am going to focus on the second great commandment. We often think of this one in the words of the Golden Rule as stated by Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Luke: ““Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.” In other words, we should love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves and treat them accordingly. This is true, but today we are going to look at this commandment from a different angle.

A couple days ago I started listening to the “Renegades” podcast which is a conversation between former President Barack Obama and rock and roll star Bruce Springsteen. This is not an endorsement or recommendation. It is possible to learn something from—and respect—someone without agreeing with everything they say.

The first two episodes of this podcast deal with the issue of race. If you are familiar with Springsteen’s E Street Band, you know the “Big Man,” the saxophone player, Clarence Clemons, one of Springsteen's best friends. Clemons, who died in 2011, is black. He was a little bit older than Springsteen, he’d gone to college, almost played pro football, he was a little bit more knowledgeable about the world than Springsteen was. One night they had gone to a nightclub. Springsteen was watching the band and he turned around to see Clarence involved in a fight at the door. The other guys were the instigators and were thrown out of the club. On the way out, one of the guys called Clemons the n-word. Nothing happened from that, but then Clarence disappeared, so Springsteen went looking for him. He found him in the parking lot standing by a car. Springsteen went over to him and Clarence just looked at him and said, “Bruce, why’d they say that? I play football with those guys every Sunday. Why’d they say that?” Those guys were his friends but then they got in a fight and out came the racial slurs. All Springsteen could say was, “I don’t know, man.” After sharing a similar incident from his own childhood in Hawaii, President Obama went on to speak about the source of pain from those types of experiences, “You know how to deal with a klansman. There is no question about where they stand and what they are thinking. What hurts is when something like this comes from someone that you know is not

a bad person--maybe even a friend--but they still have that card in their pocket and at unexpected moments it comes out.”

So...Why did those guys say that to Clarence? Imagine the scene. Clarence Clemons and his football buddies got in a fight and they were kicked out of the nightclub but he wasn't. How did they get back at him? By calling him a name as a way to “put him in his place.” So...why did they say that? Words hurt and by hurting Clarence in that way, they forced him down and--at least in their own minds--raised themselves up. By hurting him, they made themselves feel better. Going beyond the racial context of Springsteen's story, why do we fail to love our neighbor? It's often because we don't love ourselves. Lack of love for our neighbor and a desire to hurt that other person often has its source in our own insecurities, our own guilt or shame, something inside of us that we don't like even if we don't realize that it is there. That lack of love for our neighbor can come from a wound within ourselves given to us by someone else which we haven't come to terms with yet.

Much of our woundedness comes from being hurt in a way that tells us we weren't--or aren't--loved. I remember a conversation that I had with a black veteran at the domiciliary in White City during my chaplain internship. He had a difficult childhood. He grew up in a big city in the east. His dad was out of the picture. He'd get beat up walking home from school because of his skin color. He didn't feel loved. He told me about being at a church service while he was in the army. His buddy sitting next to him had an intense spiritual experience and conversion which turned his life around. The guy that I was speaking to didn't have that experience. He started crying when he told me this. Then he got mad. And then he said to me, “I would have thought God at least would have loved me.” Imagine the wound that comes from that, from believing that God doesn't love you. He wasn't just speaking about the church service; he was talking about his entire life. How could God have allowed all that bad stuff to happen? I don't remember what I said, but I think it was the same response Bruce Springsteen gave to Clarence Clemons: “I don't know, man.”

We all need to be healed in some way or another and that healing most likely has to begin with knowing we are loved, most especially that we are loved by God. Sometimes when something bad happens in our lives, we say or hear, “It's all part of God's plan.” That isn't true. God is all love and all good. He doesn't create or plan for evil. He has a perfect plan for our lives and that plan is only for our good,

never for our harm...but he has also given us free will. We can accept his plan or not. Other people can accept his plan or not. When we or others choose to reject God's will, that is how bad things happen, even to good people who are trying to live according to God's will. Bad things happen--not because God doesn't love us, but because God loves us so much that he has given us the freedom to choose whether or not to love him in return.

If you need proof of God's love for you, look at the crucifix behind me. All of the evil in the world is a result of sin--our own personal sins and the collective sins of societies and nations. Jesus took all that evil upon himself so that it could be nailed to the cross along with himself and killed. He paid the price for each one of us so that we can be reconciled with God and experience the fullness of his love. Knowing we are loved by God, we can then begin to love ourselves, which then allows us to love our neighbor.

If we want to help to heal the wounds of our society and of our community, we have to be healed ourselves. The healing that we experience through God's love takes time and probably a lot of human help along the way. A good starting point is the sacrament of reconciliation during which we physically experience God's forgiveness when we hear the words: "I absolve you from your sins." Healing retreats or healing Masses can also be very helpful. I am looking into how we can bring some of both to our parish. Spiritual direction and counseling can also be helpful.

Right now though, as we prepare to encounter Christ in the sacrament of his love--the eucharist--I invite all of us to offer all of our wounds and our sorrows--and our joys--up to Jesus. Place them on the altar with the gifts so that he can give them back to us transformed into his own flesh and blood. Let Jesus begin the healing we all need so that we can better love our neighbors.