

30<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY A 2008    OCTOBER 26, 2008

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EXODUS 22:20-261 THESSALONIANS 1:5C-10

MATTHEW 22:34-40



It's a four letter word, and it makes me cringe. Cringe at least when it occurs again as the major theme of the Scripture readings for a Sunday, and I can find no way to get around it. L-o-v-e, love is that one word that makes me want to call in sick for the weekend. Then, of course, I find I ask myself, "What's wrong with you? You must be crazy not to want to talk about 'love.' It is, after all, what Christ is all about. It is, after all, who Christ is. And, it is what makes the world go round. Everyone from Bing Crosby to the Beatles has sung about it, and it tends to make people all gooey inside." I know all of that, and yet to even begin to construct a homily about love and the great command of loving God and neighbor found in today's Gospel makes my head spin.

I suppose my first problem is, "What are we talking about when we talk about 'love'?" It seems to mean so many different things to so many people that it has no real definition at all. Even more difficult is when we look at the things that have been done in the name of love, especially in the name of love for God, it can leave us reeling. Two planes hit the World Trade Center in the name of love for God, for Allah; we are fast to see the absurdity here, but we Christians haven't done so badly either. We fought and killed each other in the name of God during the years of the Reformation. For centuries we killed Jews, Jesus own people in the name of love for Him. During the Crusades we killed Muslims and Muslims killed Christians, and sometimes Christians killed Christians all in the name of God. It seems so ironic that we have made the God of Life; the God that we believe is Love itself, so synonymous with death and hatred. It's a wonder God hasn't seen fit to squelch us all and washed His hands of us, simply leaving us to our own self-destruction.

Yet for all of that we have done to prove the opposite, our Scripture today tells us that we are to be men, women, and children who love.

Our reading from *Exodus* this morning seems to take into account some knowledge of our past actions as human beings as it tell us that we should love God by not doing hateful things to others. We are not to "molest or oppress" the alien. We are not to do wrong to widows or orphans. We are to give to others freely without provision for profit. Yahweh tells His people, that as a people who have been oppressed and taken advantage of, they should

readily empathize with the predicament of others. In all things we are to consider first the good of the other person, and then act toward others as God has acted toward us.

As we listen to our Gospel from Matthew today we have to remember its context. Here in the Twenty Second Chapter of his Gospel, Matthew gives us a series of encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees and/or the Sadducees. These two groups are enemies yet in order to rid themselves of Jesus they joined forces. First they try to trip Him up with the coin to pay the census tax, then about the woman who was married to three brothers in succession asking who would be her husband at the resurrection of the dead, and now today with the Greatest Commandment. It was the belief among the Jews that salvation depended on the observance of the Mosaic Law. That Law, however, was not simply the Ten Commandments, but all the laws contained in the Torah which they believed was written by Moses. In the Torah there were 613 different precepts. Far too many for the ordinary Jew to merely remember never mind observe. Men like the Pharisees who believed in the strict observance of the Law believed that all 613 of these precepts were of equal importance and therefore all had to be observed if they were to be saved. Coming from the mouths of the Pharisees is the question “Master, which commandment of the Law is the greatest?” It’s not as innocent as it may sound to our ear. Simply to pick one commandment as being the greatest meant that the Pharisees could accuse Jesus of trying to diminish the law, to diminish the teachings of Moses. If Jesus were to say they were all of equal importance, the Sadducees who believed that some distinctions had to be made in the gravity of the various precepts, would accuse Jesus saying that He was making salvation impossible for the ordinary Jew.

Jesus aware of their duplicity adroitly answers pointing to two Laws. The first from Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The second from the Book of Leviticus is, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In making the distinction between the two, Jesus satisfies the Sadducees by making the Law observable as well as pointing out the most important. In choosing these two Commandments, Jesus proposes two that were all inclusive and on which the entire Law depends. If we love God and if we love our neighbor it follows that we should do nothing to offend either.

Again, Jesus is able to avoid the trap His enemies have set for Him, but in the process He made it easier for the believing Jew and for us to understand exactly what we need to do to fulfill our duties to God and neighbor. Yet, before we think this is easy, remember that we are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. Which means that we

are to love God with all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do. Every word we speak, every action we perform, as well as our failures to speak and act, should be done with God in mind. That is why a prayer like the *Morning Offering* helps us keep in mind our desire to love God at every moment of our day. To love our neighbor as ourselves is not a second command, but is part of the first. Jesus, after all, was asked about the one Great Command not two. As our First Reading today from *Exodus* reminds us, accepting responsibility for each other embodies here and now our love for God.

In our reading from Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians today, at the very beginning of the this Letter, Paul points to the fact that the exceptional Christian lives, the members of the community are leading points to their total acceptance and love of God. The depth of this belief is seen in the love they share for one another in their serving God. They have become, although Paul does not say so explicitly, people who have taken the Great Commandment of Love into their hearts and it has changed their individual lives, as well as the life of the entire community. Their imitation of Christ has been transformational.

This command to love God and to love neighbor is nothing new to us. We are to love God with all that we are, and show that love of God by loving our neighbor as we ourselves would want to be loved. Yet, knowing the commands and doing them are two very different things. Love is not a matter of convenience, and our own selfish self-love gets in the way far too often. Like the community at Thessalonica we can only hope to express such love by following the model Christ provides for us in Himself, the Model of Service.

As I was working on this homily, Fr. Vince passed by my office and asked how it was going. "Terrible," I said, "it's about love." He replied, "But, you do that so well because you know that love is a matter of the will." As usual he's right. Love, for all the emotion and passion that is part of it, is also a matter of the will. If love was all ease and pleasure we would have no problem because of human disposition to both would simply lead us to love. But all love, by its very nature, involves sacrifice and perhaps just a little bit of pain, and to accept the challenge of love, we must value love over the inconvenience of sacrifice and the discomfort of pain. The reason so many marriages fail is that the couple never committed themselves to all that love entails: they want the pleasure but not the pain. If we chose to love God, and it is a choice, then we chose to embrace even the need to love our neighbor. That is where the sacrifice and pain are to be found. To make the choice means that we surrender our will to the will of God in the commitment to love, and to the power of the Holy Spirit who gives the strength and courage to love. Every time we make the choice to love, to really love, we make

**the choice to die to ourselves, and we cannot survive that death without the life of the Holy Spirit. Love is the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, and whether we believe it possible or not, we can with the Spirit's help love our neighbor as we would like to be loved ourselves.**

**Without even admitting it to themselves, many see the command to love as asking of them the impossible. And, it is, if we try to go about it on our own. With God, however, all things are possible. When Jesus said in the Garden, "Not My will, Father, but Yours be done," He was given the strength that was not His as the human Jesus. He was given the strength to love all and each of us with unconditional love. God hardly expects the same of us, but if we will to love, the Spirit will be at our side.**