

## HOMILY SUNDAY 30-A

“The Law of Love”

(Exodus 22:21-27; Psalm 18; 1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10; Matthew 22:34-40)

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Are you living the total gospel?

Live both commandments and walk in balance: Love God, and love your neighbour as you love yourself

By rabbinical count, the *Law* consisted of some 613 commandments. The Jewish religion could easily slide into a slavish, impersonal keeping of laws which had been finely tuned by the rabbis. They taught that there were 248 parts of the human body, and had a law for each part. There are 365 days in the year, and they had a law for each day, totalling 613. The thinking was that this way they covered the whole human person as well as all of life. There were also 248 positive laws, and 365 prohibitions. They also made distinctions between light and heavy laws, some being much more important than others. Such was the Jewish religious reality at the time of Jesus.

According to Flor McCarthy, the question as to which commandment was the greatest was one frequently discussed among the rabbis. Jesus was asked to name one but responded by naming two. That is because, for him, the second followed directly and necessarily from the first. Love of neighbor arises out of love of God. Both commandments are found in the Old Testament. What is new is not the fact that Jesus brought these two commandments together, but that he made them of equal importance. Helping strangers, giving to the poor and being compassionate to all is just as important as prayer and loving God.

The Jerome Biblical Commentary adds to that insight. Jesus is presented here as having the power to interpret, and even re-state the Law. His answer quotes two Old Testament texts that form the foundation of the new morality of the Gospels (Deuteronomy 6:5 “Love God with all your heart, strength and mind” and Leviticus 19:18 “Love your neighbor as yourself”). Deuteronomy 6 is part of the Jewish *schema* or profession of faith. As mentioned above, the novelty here is in placing Leviticus 19 on the same level, making it equally “heavy.” To this arrangement of the two commandments so that they become effectively one, there is no parallel in Jewish literature. Nowhere are they stated as the two greatest commandments of the Law, nor are they so explicitly given equal weight. Matthew alone adds that the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments - that is, the entire revelation of the Old Testament. Good works have value as acts of the love of God and of neighbor.

There is a very human danger as life unfolds to emphasize one commandment to the detriment of the other. A naturally prayerful, pious person may spend hours in prayer for another person, yet neglect the necessity to try to be the answer to that prayer by loving actions towards that person. On the other hand, a person inclined to work for social justice, may exhaust him or herself in frenetic activity on behalf of some just cause, forgetting to renew their own personal resources with prayer and forgetting that ultimately it is God who will give the fruit. The great command to love God has as its inseparable counterpart the command to love neighbor. One cannot first love God and then, as a second task, love one’s neighbor. To love God is to love one’s neighbor, and vice versa.

The challenge is to walk a balanced life and live both these commandments to the full. It is interesting that the program of Alcoholics Anonymous actually contains within its Twelve Steps a natural balance between the three components of the Great Command of Jesus.

Three of the Steps (Steps 2, 3, 7 and 11) are all about faith in God, prayer to God, in short, all about *love of God*. Coming to believe in a Higher Power, surrendering to God as we understand God, praying to God for healing of character defects and finally, seeking only the will of God and the power to carry it out through prayer and meditation, are what these Steps are all about.

Three of the Steps (5, 8, 9 and 12) are all about fellowship, sharing, in short, all about *loving our neighbour*. Admitting to another person the exact nature of our wrongs, making amends to those we have offended and sharing our experience with others as a way of trying to help them, are what these Steps are all about.

The last three Steps (1, 4, 6 and 10) are all about self awareness or *loving ourselves*. Admitting that I am powerless over something in my life, doing a searching and fearless moral inventory of my life, identifying my shortcomings and reflecting back on our lives at the end of each day are what these three Steps are all about.

Corbin Eddy adds an interesting commentary. He notes that Jesus misquotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and substitutes *mind* for *might*. This is significant, for mind and might are very different energy sources. Perhaps Jesus is suggesting that a human person's response to the law of God is not mindless nor simply rote effort to memorize many laws. Obedience, justice and love are not exercised without discretion. Just the contrary is true. The two great commandments engage our whole humanity in an ongoing conversation with God and with each other. To keep them well requires a passionate, heartfelt, soulful and mindful commitment to the God of the universe and to God's created world. Jesus is inviting us to commit with our whole being. There is nothing mechanical, boring or humdrum about being a "law-abiding citizen" – at least not according to Jesus. It is a passionate love affair with God and the whole of humanity.

Wally is someone who lives this gospel in an admirable way. As a convert, he has a very lively faith in God and a deep love for God that he expresses through daily prayer, reading scripture, regular worship on Sunday and even taking an occasional retreat such as Cursillo. He also does a monthly 24 hour retreat called a *poustinia* (the Russian word for desert) during which he rests, prays, fasts and writes.

That love for God is enfolded in the many ways that he loves his neighbour, starting with his family. When away from home, he calls his wife every night just to share their day. When I commented that all those long distance phone calls must be expensive, he replied firmly, "It's not an expense, it's an investment." Once a week, they have a family night where they cancel all other activities outside the home, have a meal together, pray over a scripture passage together, share their thoughts and feelings with each other, then they play a board game as a family. Wally also sits on the parish council, volunteers his time with Habitat for Humanity and is a very involved member of the Knights of Columbus.

As for loving himself, Wally has learned the hard way to take care of himself. After burning out early in his career, he now has a self-care plan that he follows, including daily exercise, a day off each week, several hobbies such as gardening and sailing, and seeing a spiritual director on a regular basis.

Wally is a good example of someone who takes this Sunday's gospel seriously. May I suggest that we all learn from him and do an evaluation of how we are keeping the Great Commandment to love God and love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is an experience in itself of living out this gospel. Certainly we are here to love God back. We are also here to grow in our love for each other and to gain confidence and self esteem for ourselves in living this way of love that Jesus has given us.

So let us live the total gospel and walk in balance in our lives, by loving God, and loving our neighbours as we love ourselves.