

Cycle A 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1, Ex 22:20-26

Thus says the LORD: "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans.

"If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner toward him by demanding interest from him. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body. What else has he to sleep in? If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate."

Responsorial Psalm, Ps 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

R. (2) I love you, Lord, my strength.

I love you, O LORD, my strength, O LORD, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

My God, my rock of refuge, my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold! Praised be the LORD, I exclaim, and I am safe from my enemies.

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

The LORD lives and blessed be my rock! Extolled be God my savior. You who gave great victories to your king and showed kindness to your anointed.

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

Reading II, 1 Thes 1:5c-10

Brothers and sisters: You know what sort of people we were among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth not only in Macedonia and in Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves openly declare about us what sort of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to await his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath.

Gospel, Mt 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a scholar of the law tested him by asking, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "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. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Several years ago I went on retreat to be with the Trappist monks at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers. The community leader Abbot Francis Michael told us a story about what it is like being a monk. He drew a big circle and said that when God calls you to be a monk it is like stepping into the circle knowing that you will never leave. God tells you there are two rules: first is that He will decide who will live with you inside the circle at the Monastery. You don't get to choose who will live with you. This is not always the easiest thing to do, because sometimes we just don't like certain people. In a Monastery the monks are stuck with each other. The second rule is that you love each other. It sounds simple, but it is not always so simple, even for monks.

As I was listening to Abbot Francis Michael tell this story it seemed to me that living in a Monastery is a lot like being a Christian. When we are baptized, we enter into a community of believers that we will never leave; baptism into the Body of Christ doesn't wash off. God gives faith to those who are in our community and created those who are born into our families...we don't get to choose. Oh, and yes, we are told to love one another. It sounds simple, but sometimes it is very hard, because sometimes we just don't like certain people. Or, sometimes we don't like what people in our own families are doing, but we have to love them anyway. It is not easy being a monk or a Christian. But Jesus, is asking us to reach outside ourselves even farther. *"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. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

A fundamental theme that runs throughout the entire Bible is this: "God offers, we respond." God's offer of love for us is a given; His unconditional love is always offered to us no matter what. The result of His offer, however, is very conditional. You see the result depends upon our response.

How, then, do we respond to Christ's mandate that we love everyone as we love ourselves? First of all, we should take it for what it is - a mandate, a commandment. It is something we must choose to do with little regard for our feelings. It's a matter of what we do; it's not about what we feel.

Feelings are important, but feelings are not decisive. Convictions, things we are convinced of, those are decisive. Feelings are not, and more often than not, acting on our feelings leads us down wrong paths and into trouble. When it comes to giving ourselves to others in love we have to make decisions. No one can tell us to have warm, fuzzy feelings toward another. Not even God commands that of us. No. It's what we do that matters, not how we feel. Jesus knows that feelings come and go, but our decisions can last.

Isn't Christianity something more than being nice or simply having nice feelings toward others? I mean, even atheists can be nice people. But, when did Jesus ever mention being nice toward others? God does not say: "I was hungry, and you felt sorry for me. I was naked, and you felt embarrassed. I was sick and you didn't want to come near me." God is interested only in what we have chosen to do for others, not in how we felt about them. The only thing that counted with Him was that the hungry were fed, the naked were clothed, and the lonely and abandoned were sought out, and that we stood by them.

Love of neighbors, people outside our family, has a different dynamic than inside the family. Outside we have more choice and maybe we are guided more by feelings from 1st impressions. Inside families we are like the monks, we don't get much choice; we are stuck with whoever God put us with. I remember our first Pastor, Father Hickey, asked me to bring Communion to someone at the Forsyth County Jail. When I first entered the Jail I was a bit apprehensive and my "danger radar" was on full alert. I felt an evil presence like a cloud permeating the halls and cells throughout the building. After a private visit, the guard walked me and the inmate back to his cell. One of his cell mates

was waiting at the door. He was rough looking guy with black prison tattoos of chains around his neck and down his arms. When he asked if I would bless him, I thought to myself, “who am I to refuse to bless anyone, even this guy?” And so I prayed with a hand on his head that Jesus would bless him. In the following months I visited with the “Tattoo Man” several times. Once when he told me he saw the Devil twice in his life, I was thinking, “Devil, I am looking at you right now.” But, I was somewhat surprised to discover I had no real fear...there was no fear like I anticipated on my first visit. In fact, I recall the “cloud of evil” over time was replaced with more a sense of sadness and sheer boredom of the inmates....and unexpectedly, glimpses of God’s love and joy and hope.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate realist. He commands us, He mandates us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We are to especially love those who are unlovable, those who are particularly shunned and live out on the margins of our lives. He closes our little loopholes, our exceptions; He challenges our prejudice and presents us with the most demanding of all Gospel messages, allowing us no compromises, no human "wiggle room." The call from Jesus to us is to get extremely serious about what we do...not what we feel.

I don't care how you feel, Jesus says to us, simply love your neighbors. Love them as your heavenly Father loves them. Love them...the good and the bad alike...with the unconditional love with which your Father in heaven loves them. Love all of your neighbors in what you do to them, in what you do for them, and in how you act toward them. All of those complicated and complex feelings of ours will eventually follow along. It’s a matter of what we do; it's not about what we feel.