

### **31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

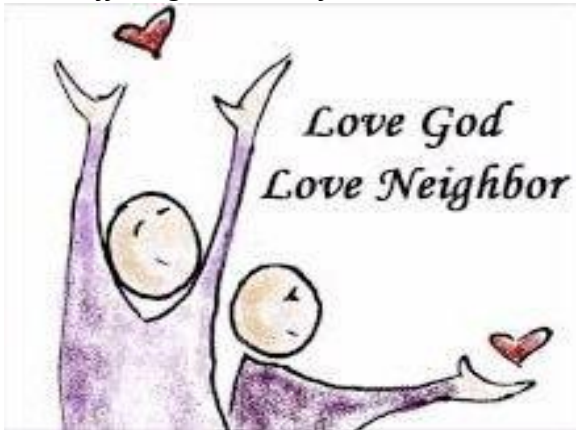
Cycle B, 10.31.21

Deuteronomy 6:2-6/Hebrews 7:23-28/

Mark 12:28b-34

#### **LOVE INSERTS US INTO THE HEART OF GOD**

Sometimes I wish we could coin a new word for love, a word free from the baggage of romance novels, Hollywood films, and greeting card sentimentality. I wish we could experience the subversive power of Christianity's love story with fresh, un-jaded hearts. Our scriptures today offer us the bedrock fundamentals. In our Gospel, a scribe comes to Jesus and asks, *"Which commandment is the first of all?"* Jesus responds with an answer we church folks know so well, we barely register it: the first commandment is to love. Specifically, to love God with our entire beings, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In a rare moment, a scribe and Jesus agree, and the scribe elaborates on Jesus's answer with a surprising insight of his own: to love God and neighbor is *"much more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices."*



In other words, love is more important than piety, ritual, tradition, or penance. Love is more important than religion. When Jesus hears the scribe's wise words, he says, *"You are not far from the kingdom of God."* Everyone listening in on the conversation falls silent, not daring to ask Jesus another question.

We should pause over that silence each time we hear the story, because it forces us to ask some hard questions: When was the last time I felt moved to silence by a call to love? How long has it been since the challenge and the beauty of the first commandment gave me pause? Undid me? Caused me to change course and reorder my life? If I'm honest, I'd have to admit that it has been a long time. That's partly because I'm primed by our culture to think of love as affection. I hear the first commandment and think, *"I need to feel love. God wants me to experience affection, affinity, attraction. This is a call to a lifetime of deep emotion."*

To be fair, there *is* an emotional element to love. Love isn't a grim duty; it's a wellspring that originates in the heart. Of course, it has an affective side. But sometimes we focus so hard on the emotional and affective aspects of love that we forget its rigor, its robustness, its *discomfort*. We assume that loving God and our neighbors means expressing friendly sentiments to God in church on Sunday and exchanging warm pleasantries with the people who live near us during the week.



We forget that in the scriptures, the call to love is a call to sacrifice and even suffering. It's a call to bear a cross and lay down our lives. Biblical love isn't an emotion we feel, it's a path we travel. As the children of God, we're called to *walk* in love. Think aerobic activity, not Hallmark sentiment. But what does this kind of love look like in practice?

There are a few Greek words used for love. One is *eros*. *Eros* is that unabashed love that is hot to the touch and turns us on to somebody. There's another word for love -- *philia*, as in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. *Philia* is the convivial love that's evident when you're out with family or close friends for a birthday dinner. But the biblical word for love is *agape*, a unique and significant word, a word used to describe God's love, a love that gives itself away freely, and, in turn, the love that we are to offer others in imitation of God's love – love that is enduring, self-effacing, universal and without limit.

Dr. Allan Dienstag, a New York psychologist, leads support groups and a writing group for people in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. He was working with a woman whose husband was in a nursing home. There's that period of time when people with Alzheimer's can't recognize their family members. It's a wrenching and painful time, just awful for spouses and family. This woman's husband was in that period of time, and it would happen every so often that her husband wouldn't know who she was. The first time it happened, she came back to Dr. Dienstag in a panic. She was distraught and said she didn't want to live anymore if her husband wasn't capable of recognizing her. Now when she would go to see him the first thing she would say is, "Do you remember who I am?" Well, he didn't. The doctor suggested to her that there are other ways that she could see that he recognizes her.

Even when someone can't answer that question, you can see on their face, you can see in their body language. There are lots of ways that you can tell. But the husband got to a certain point where he just couldn't answer the question. And one day, she went in and asked him, and he looked at her and

he said, "I don't know who you are, but I love you." It was a moment of revelation that transformed their relationship. He remembered love. *This is agape love.*



When an expectant mother takes her husband's hand and places it where the baby growing inside just kicked, they both look down at the bulging stomach and say: "We don't know you, but we love you" -- *this is agape love*. When a teacher or a pastoral minister or a nurse enters a classroom, a hospital room or a meeting place for the first time and looks at the people or the person before him or her and thinks, "I don't know you, but I love you" -- *this is agape love*: love that asks nothing in return, that pours itself out on behalf of the other.

To lose yourself in another's arms, or in another's company, or in suffering for the sake of another, including one who inflicts suffering upon you – to lose yourself in these ways is to find yourself. It's what life is all about and it's the paradox of the Gospel made real: *To the one who has (that is, has his or her finger on this mystery) more will be given; to the one who has not (that is, he or she who doesn't have a clue about the nature of this love) even what little they have will be taken away.* It's why we love the Prayer of St. Francis, because it expresses this truth so simply and directly: *It is in giving that we receive, and in dying that we're born to eternal life.*

We can't easily coin a new word for love, but perhaps the insight of the scribe in today's gospel can help us redefine our understanding. How many times have you been loved when you were bitter and bereft? When has someone loved you in the midst of their own vulnerability? How often have you pledged your fidelity to the vulnerable, the lost, the defeated, the hopeless — and discovered that God meets you in that pledge? When have you embarked down a loving path, not because of what you *felt*, but because you responded in obedience to the first and greatest commandment?



I'm glad that our Gospel story this week ends in stunned silence. Silence *is* the appropriate first response to the radical love to which we're called. We dare not speak of it glibly. We dare not cheapen it with shallow sentiment or piety. Rather, let's ask for the grace to receive it as the wise scribe received it -- in awed and grateful silence. Then, when we're ready, we can move ahead. We can walk in love. It's in the compassion and kindness extended to others that our humanity most resembles God. It's in the respect and honor in which we hold others that we most praise the God of love. It's in acts of kindness and selflessness that we mirror the love of God in our midst.

The poet Kahlil Gibran, in his poem On Love, captures it well:

*When you love you should not say,  
"God is in my heart,"  
but rather, "I am in the heart of God."  
And think not you can direct  
the course of love,  
for love, if it finds you worthy,  
directs your course.*



*John Kasper, OSFS*

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