

Fr. Curtis Miller October 28-29, 2023 Homily for the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“What is the greatest commandment?” It sounds like an easy question because we’ve heard this reading before, and we know what Jesus is going to answer: love. But it was actually a much harder question than it seems. The Pharisees again were trying to trip Jesus up with a trick question. Whichever commandment Jesus chose, He would be leaving out the others, inviting the challenge: “What about...?” It’s like asking a parent, “Which is your favorite child?” No matter how you answer, you’re going to upset someone.

The great Jewish Rabbi Hillel, who lived just a little earlier than Jesus, was similarly asked to summarize the whole Torah, the Jewish Law, while standing on one foot. In other words, keep it brief. Hillel responded, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”

The Jewish Law consisted of 613 separate commandments, most of them negative “Thou shalt not”s, covering religious rituals and celebrations, marriage, clothing, diet, and every other aspect of life. How was Jesus to just pick out one commandment as the most important? At the heart of all these regulations is the Ten Commandments. Often, the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments present the first three on the first tablet and the other seven on the second. The first tablet covers our relationship with God, while the second focuses on our relationship with other people. Jesus summarized both by teaching that we are to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves. If we truly love God and love our neighbor, we will keep all of the other commandments. If we fail to love, then no matter what impressive feats we accomplish, we have failed to fulfill the most important and necessary task of our lives. Hence, St. Paul writes in his First Letter to the Corinthians, “If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing” (I Cor. 13:1-3).

So to love is the essential commandment. For some of us, it will be easier to love God; for others, it will be easier to love our neighbor. But Jesus makes the point that these two commandments are not two separate options, but one in the same commandment. We show our love of God by loving our neighbor and our love of our neighbors by loving the God Who created them. St. John wrote in his First Letter, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (I John 4:20). Jesus makes this clear when He teaches that when we help even the least of our brothers or sisters who is hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, or imprisoned, we do that service for Jesus Himself (cf. Matthew 25). Ultimately, that kind of active love for our neighbor will be the standard by which we are judged. As St. Mother Teresa said, “At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by ‘I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in.’” Another time, when Jesus taught that we must love our neighbor, someone asked Him, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. The answer is our neighbor is everyone, even our enemies.

Now, we obviously accept Jesus' teaching that to love God and our neighbor is the greatest commandment, but when we see all the evil around us, it doesn't seem like enough to combat all that evil. There is the ongoing war in Ukraine, the escalating war in Israel, seven murders in Vermont in the past month, 18 people killed and dozens of others injured by a gunman in Maine this week. Love doesn't seem strong enough in the face of such evil and suffering. But let us pause and consider what kind of love Jesus is commanding us to practice. At the Last Supper, Jesus revisited this commandment, saying that we are to love one another, but He intensifies it by saying that we are to love as Jesus Himself loves us. Jesus loves us perfectly, self-sacrificially, laying His life down for us in torment on the cross. Jesus' love is more than just a warm, fuzzy feeling; it is a deliberate choice to suffer and even sacrifice our lives for God and for other people, even for our enemies. That is a hard and serious kind of love! And that is precisely what gives this love its power over evil. That's the love of Jesus sacrificing His life on the cross and giving us His Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

I've told this story before, but I'll mention it again briefly today. Ten and a half years ago, in 2013, when I was in seminary in Boston, I went to see the running of the Boston Marathon. I was just a few miles from the finish line, where two terrorists detonated a pair of bombs, killing three people, and injuring hundreds of other innocent men, women, and children. I'll never forget seeing images on the news of the sidewalks saturated nearly black with blood. Yet that week, hundreds, maybe even thousands, of people lined up to donate blood to help the victims of this atrocity. More blood was poured out willingly from people's arms, out of love for complete strangers, than was shed in hate in the streets by those terrorists.

This past week, in news reports from Maine, I saw an interview with a man named Leroy Walker, whose son, Joseph Walker, was killed by the shooter. This father said that he could not harbor anger or hate for the man who killed his son. "You have to put that part of it out of your mind. You have to let the Lord do whatever needs to be done. And if this person was at the time in his right mind, I believe he would have been a loving person, just like we are... I just can't hate him. I believe in the Lord, and I think the Lord will prevail in the end... You can't run around this world hating people. If you do, these kind of things will happen more and more... If you hate and the hate drives you crazy, you're going to hurt people... And I'm sure, whatever happened to his mind, I'm sure he wasn't born to be a killer, and I'm sure his father and mother would have never believed this would have happened with him. All I can say is that I'm sorry this has happened to all of us, and I'm sorry what may happen to him. And God will prevail. Hate will never bring my son back." His son was killed when he rushed the gunman, trying to stop him from shooting others. It's clear that he learned that same kind of real, self-sacrificial love from his father. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Love is a choice. It can often be a hard choice. But Jesus, Who loves us with this kind of perfect love, will also help us to live it out in our own lives, too, if only we ask for His help.