

Gospel: Matthew 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."

Gospel Study: *The Heart of it All*

This gospel today is the heart of it all. The heart of the gospel. The heart of Jesus' teaching. The heart of what our life with the Lord is all about. A lawyer comes up to Jesus and asked Him what was a very common question in first century Palestine, "Teacher which commandment of the law is the greatest?" This question was often asked because the Pharisees had identified 613 commandments contained in the Torah—that is the first five books of the Bible. 248 of these commandments were positive, that is, *thou shall* statements. And 365, one for every day of the year, were negative: *thou shall not*s.

Well the obvious problem is: How in the world could people possibly remember all of these commandments, much less follow them? So, the rabbis and teachers of Jesus' day would often address this problem in two different ways. First, they would try to draw a distinction between what was considered the heavy or serious commandments, such as the 10 Commandments.

As we know them, the Decalogue: Honor thy father and mother; Thou shall not steal; Thou shall not bear false witness. Those Commandments were all considered heavy and serious commandments. Or, they would consider others the light, or less serious commandments, and you could read these in the book of Leviticus. There is one that talked about what you should do if you find a bird's nest. Or, there is one about restricting any kind of tattoo on your body.

A second way that the teachers customarily dealt with this dilemma, having so many Commandments, is to try to find a way to summarize all of them. Now, it's interesting that in Jesus' very response to the lawyer in asking which is the greatest commandment, he both clearly states not only what's most important, but also seems to suggest that this summarizes it all. It's the heart of it all. It's what's at the heart (the center, the core) of what God's revelation is all about. And Jesus says to Him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with your soul and with all of your mind."

No one would have doubted or questioned Jesus' most orthodox answer because what Jesus was responding is simply by reciting the best-known prayer of the Jewish person, which was called The Shema prayer. It was also a very basic creed of Judaism that began by saying, "the Lord is our God and the Lord alone." Remember, Judaism was a monotheistic religion amidst a polytheistic society that believed in many gods and they were saying, "the Lord our God is Lord alone." Jesus was quoting The Shema, that is, the passage written in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. And it contains the most revered and recited prayer of every Jew, that was prayed several times a day. As I already mentioned it was referred to as The Shema, which is the Hebrew word for *hear*, the imperative. In other words, what they're saying is, "Listen up. Listen up Israel. This is what matters most: That you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind."

To love with one's heart... We need to remember that the heart was, for the Jews in Jesus' day, the place where all decisions are ultimately made. It's that place where we determine our will to do something or not to do something. To love God with our whole heart means to decide to live a loving life. Love is a decision. To love with one's whole soul, seems to connect us immediately with the Holy Spirit of God; that place in us—each one of us—where the Spirit of God lives. So to love with our whole soul was to love with the Spirit of God: To love with God's love, with God's energy, with God's power. And to live with one's whole mind suggests that love isn't just a feeling. It isn't just a fleeting thing. Love requires mindful attention and awareness and sensitivity, as the mind is that computer control center that determines how we go about all of our relationships.

It's interesting to take this passage that Jesus was reciting from Deuteronomy and read it in its full context, which I would like to do now. You can fully appreciate what Jesus is asking of us. This is our creed as Christians. Even if you were not to remember the 10 Commandments, all you need to remember are these two commandments that we are studying today. And in that passage of Deuteronomy, we read: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind." They say you need to take these words to heart, which I enjoin on you today. In other words, interiorize them. Internalize them in every way.

It goes on to say: *Drill them into your children.* Drill them into your children. I often think today, one of the saddest things is that our faith is not always being handed on effectively to our children. Look at what is happening to our generation that now is largely unchurched. Maybe that's part of the problem in our society today, we need to go back to the basics of the Bible and the injunction of Jesus to say, "Drill them to our children." In fact, this prayer, The Shema, was the very first prayer that a Jewish boy or girl would have been taught. How are we teaching our children to pray?

It goes on to say we need to speak of them at home and abroad whether you are busy or at rest. In fact, no matter how busy you were, the Jewish people were asked to begin their day with the recitation of The Shema prayer, and they are to end their day with the recitation of The Shema prayer. And sometime during the day, they are to refocus themselves by praying this Shema: *Hear Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, therefore you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.* I'll get to that later but I think this is a very important point here, how we need to keep this always in the front of our mind and always at hand.

And then the next line in this Deuteronomic passage is: "Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorpost of your houses and on your gates." It's fascinating, in visiting the Holy Land, to see many Orthodox Jews take this so seriously that literally, they take what is called the tefillin, or in the Greek, the word is phylacteries, which is a very small 1-inch square leather box that contains this passage of Deuteronomy that I've now quoted for you, and it is contained in that box, and then they attach this little box to a leather strap, then they strap it on their forehead. The box is at the very front of their forehead and then the strap goes down to be at their very wrist, strapped onto their left wrist, closest to the heart. So that literally, they tried to keep this great commandment of God on the very front of their mind and always at hand. And it's really something to see, as even to this day, an Orthodox Jew will pray with this tefillin attached to him; praying that he would always keep this in front of his mind and always at hand, the love of the Lord.

Furthermore, as this passage of Deuteronomy suggests, we should also write it on our doorposts. When I was visiting Israel, I bought one of these—what is called a mezuzah, which is the Hebrew word for doorpost—and this passage is again inscribed in this mezuzah, they nail it onto the right top corner of the doorpost so that as the Jewish man or woman, or child, come or go, they will touch the mezuzah and then kiss their fingers as a way of saying, in their coming and going, they want to always take the love of the Lord with them.

Now, it seems to me, that it doesn't so much matter how we understand this literally, or perhaps figuratively. What matters is this: How are we going to keep the love of the Lord always on the front of our mind, always at hand and always take the Lord with us in our coming and in our going? This is what Jesus is clearly stating matters most in life. It seems to summarize all that is written in the Bible, but He doesn't stop there. He continues. Jesus says, "This is the greatest and first commandment but the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Once more, no one would have disagreed with Him. Jesus was simply reciting another well-known passage from Leviticus 19:18 which says verbatim, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And yet, I think what is most striking about this answer of Jesus' is, (remember the lawyer asked Him the question, *Which is the greatest of the commandments?*—as in singular—and Jesus' response seems to say) after he responded with the great commandment of The Shema: I can't stop there, I have to go on and talk about this second commandment, because you cannot talk about loving God, without talking about loving your neighbor in the same breath. Love of God and love of others are like two sides of the same coin. They are inseparable.

Later in the New Testament we will hear, and when he says, you love God but hate your brother or sister you are a liar. You can't have one without the other. And the genius of Jesus is not that he would recite these two well-known passages of Israel from the Hebrew Scriptures, but the fact that he would put them together and seemed to suggest that they're almost on the same plane, that you cannot have one without the other. And yet, you cannot overlook either the fact that Jesus seems to put first things first, which is love of God. This seems to be implicit in his response that the love of neighbors somehow poured out of our love for God. If that makes sense. Our love of others is almost a natural result of loving God so much. And don't overlook the fact that implied in this great commandment of loving our neighbor as our self, that we have to love our self [as well].

As any psychologists worth their money would say, you can only give to others, what you yourself have for yourself. There is no way you could love anyone unless you first love yourself. Or as a friend of mine once said, who seemed to suffer from very low self-esteem, "Boy if we're to love our neighbor as our self, I feel sorry for my neighbor." As Carl Jung, a great psychologist, once said: "In the Christian teaching, we are to love the least of our brothers and sisters but what if we were to discover that we are the least one among those who beg for the bread of our own forgiveness; who thirst for the self-esteem and appreciation that we all need; that go hungry and homeless without being understood and welcome by our very selves."

This is part of the great commandment that we want to consider today. Jesus goes on to conclude his remarks by saying, on these two commandments—love of God and love of others—the whole law is based and the prophets as well, which is to say the whole Hebrew Scriptures, which is to say if you keep these two in mind, if you keep these two in your heart, if you keep these two in your soul, really you can forget everything else. All else is secondary. All else is just in the application of these two great Commandments. And so, what we need to keep reflecting on with these two is—or you might say three if we consider love of self to be included—how do we live this out? I don't think there is anything more important, more worth our attention, than this question. How do we love God, and others in our self, more today?

I would like to now lead us in a very brief reflection on that question, but to begin by saying, please don't see me as any kind of an expert on this. Libraries are written...how many songs and stories and commentaries and books are filling library after library with this question about how women love too much, why I love the wrong man or the latest and the greatest insight into love, and I think all of them offer many good insights really, so I don't intend to obviously have any last word or great insight, but I would like to just probe the question with you. And first, to begin with, is that I don't think there is a more important question for us in our life than to ask the question: How can we live a more loving life? Would you agree? And somehow, you know, there's many courses that are taught in colleges, but I don't know, except for a few, that's really taught on love. And this is the most important course that all of us will have to learn and struggle with, many of us repeatedly fail the relationships and hardships of managing and relating, communicating with difficult people. And getting along with others and most of all ourselves. How do we do this?

I would just like to focus my attention on the three centers of that love that seem to be proposed in Jesus' teaching. I'd like to look at the heart. I'd like to look at our mind and our soul. To begin with: our heart. As I indicated before, in this great commandment to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as our self, suggests that love is a decision. And often time I think, you know, we're so caught up in the sexual chemistry or all the other images of intimacy, we forget love is a decision of the heart. It is difficult to love. I find, personally, it's the most difficult thing to do, because it's the most important thing to do. It's the thing that deserves our best attention; our greatest energy and our constant work. I don't know about you, but I find that once you get beyond the superficial relationships that move deeper into family and relatives and committed friendships and relationships, love is difficult. It's difficult work and it takes a constant daily decision to keep doing and determining what is the loving thing to say, to do, to be.

More recently, I listened to some close married friends of mine who are struggling in their marriage, who are struggling with their family and raising their children and I said to myself, "love is difficult." But it seems that if we just ask that question each day, no matter what situation we're in, no matter what our conversation might be, no matter what particular relationship at work or at home might be that we're struggling with—*What is the loving thing to do here?* That principle of doing the most loving thing; saying the most loving words, which I suggest is not always so sentimental as we might first imagine it, but I want to speak in terms of tough love. I want to say, some of the best lessons of love I have learned have been through parents who needed to really show their children tough love through discipline; or through children who have shown their parents: this is really dysfunctional behavior I'm not going to participate in it anymore; or through spouses confronting each other and who say, "This is abusive talk I will not tolerate it anymore."

People at work are saying to the boss, even with the threat of losing their job: this is wrong, this is unjust, this is not fair, I need to say that to you. And of saying to our self, "Why do I always dump on myself? Why am I so unloving in the way that I talk to myself?" And begin to take hold of these unloving patterns and relating and making the tough decision to really do what love would ask of us. Does this make sense? This is tough work for tough minded people and I think that's the first thing. We want to raise that question in our own heart. Are we ready to decide each day to do what is most loving?

Secondly, we are to love God and others with our whole soul. What in the world is our soul? I would suggest it is that place deep inside each of us where God lives; that intangible but ever real spirit of God living in us; that place we touched into that, when we recognize it, it's like the Lord in us and I would suggest then that we remember that what we're being called to do when we love with our whole soul is to then love with the very spirit of God. It seems to move, rather easy, to love the people I like, but darn it, we also have to love the people we don't like. We even have to love ourselves, when we don't like ourselves; even our spouse when we don't like what they're doing; even our kids when we're not very proud of them right now; even this person in our life that we wish wouldn't be in our life.

How do we love those people we don't like? I would propose the only way is to love with the very love of God; that love that supersedes my needs, my dispositions and my inclinations and limitations. That is to say, to love with the very Spirit of Love of God. How do we do this? I think we need to do what Jesus would have done (and what the Orthodox Jews of his day would have done). We need to pray at the beginning and the middle and end of every day for the gift of love. We need to ask the Lord at the beginning of our day—I would suggest—that the Lord would give us all the love we would need for all the people we would meet and speak to today. Would you be willing to make that your morning offering? Would you be willing to take the end of the day and to pray about the people you've met and spoken to that day and ask how well have you loved? And again, then pray that you could continue to do that which was loving and correct that which was unloving. In preparation for this talk, I was reading this very simple but beautiful book, *Loving Jesus* by Mother Teresa. Is there a greater saint who exemplifies more beautifully this love of the Lord and love of her neighbor than Mother Teresa, whom I believe the Lord has held up like a bright light in the constellation of this society, to say look and learn how to love. And in this book—she reports during one interview—this reporter came to her and said, "How in

the world can you do all that you do? How in the world can you live among the poorest of the poor and love the most unlovable people of this world?"

And she simply says: *Oh, there's no way I could do what I do. It's only because of Jesus. It's only because I and my sister's get down on our knees every morning and ask the Lord to give us His heart of love; His soul and mind for loving. And every day, especially in celebration of the Eucharist where we receive Jesus, and his love, are we then able to share that love.*

I just want to be a microphone for what she has said, that this is what we need to do. If you are struggling in any relationship now, as I imagine most of us are blessed to have one relationship that were struggling with. Have you ever noticed that? Even if this person is taken care of, somebody else shows up and it always seems to happen. It certainly happened to me recently and I think what we need to do is take this person to prayer and ask the Lord, "Lord I have trouble with him or her, but evidently you found something nice about them when you created them, can you show me what that might be? And, how do you see them? How do I need to understand them?"

And more has happened to me in praying for a person...first of which is the sad realization that God thinks as much of them as He does me, which I was disappointed to hear. It isn't that I was right and they were wrong, God's asking to be in right relationship with them. God doesn't care, as I've often pointed out with my parents, they don't care—when the kids are fighting—who's right or who's wrong, they just want you to love, that's it, period. And then we come to realize what we need to recognize is, I don't have that capacity for love but God does and there's nothing God wants to give us more than this gift of his agape love—agape is the word used in the Scriptures for the sacrificial love—so that we would make it our practice, in learning the lesson of Mother Teresa, that we would love with the love of Jesus by praying for that every day.

Finally, how do we love with our whole mind? I would suggest we need to re-remind ourselves of what love would have us learn and what love would have us live. So what is it that we need to do? Could we just think of one thing that we could do today, that would help us grow in our love for our Lord, one another, and especially our family (sometimes the ones hardest to love and be patient with), and of course ourselves which, for many of us, is the greatest challenge of all.

In conclusion, I would just wish to share that I believe as we speak about the heart of it all, we need to recognize that this is truly our mission in life. This is all we need to remember. This is all we really need to do. To learn to love more and more and never stop learning and never stop growing in that love. Perhaps that's really where the worst heart failure is in life, that we would stop learning and growing in love.

Amen.