

30th Sunday of Ordinary Time A "To love God and neighbor"

Fr. Frank Schuster

I think I have preached on this Gospel reading a thousand times. There are 613 laws in the Torah and Jesus summarizes the Torah with two commandments, "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 first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The meaning of life couldn't be spelled out more clearly by the bible. As I have commented before, 1 John 4:16 states, "God is love." Genesis 1:26-27 states that we are made in the image and likeness of God. St. Paul says without love we are nothing. I think this message can keep things simple in the spirit life, or perhaps even more difficult. St. Bernard of Clairvaux's has an interesting take on what it means to love God.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux articulated several ways in which the disciple can love God. The first way is the love of a slave for his master. The second way is the love of a pupil for his teacher. The third way is characterized by the love of a friend for a friend and he concludes with an even better way to love God, which we will get to.

To begin with, loving God like a slave would love his master is a love based on consequences, it is based on power. "If I do not love God like I ought, God will punish me like a slave owner can punish his slave." Although there is a place for a healthy sense of fear and trembling before God in the bible, to stay in this kind of love for God would keep us forever in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, even if we uttered the name of the Lord aloud, we would be guilty of blasphemy, of profound disrespect of our creator who punishes infidelity.

Once we enter into the New Testament, when Jesus in the fullness of time became human for our salvation, he invites us into a new kind of relationship with God. To begin with, Jesus entered into a relationship with us as our teacher and spiritual master. A disciple knows his teachers name and the teacher knows his pupil's name. There is a relationship between the Lord and disciples that has evolved from the Old Testament spirituality. As we grow in discipleship, we grow in love of God as our teacher. This is the second kind of love of God St. Bernard refers to.

St. Bernard challenges us that to love God like a pupil would love a teacher is still not the perfection of what it means to love God because there is something still lacking there. You see, pupils work hard to test well and to achieve high grades from the teacher they admire, because of this, in the relationship between pupil and teachers there is conditions placed on this love (I will love you if you study hard and impress me or I will love you if you give me an A+ on the exam). This is a love based on conditions, and therefore imperfect. It is a better kind of love than one based on fear, but St. Bernard says we can do better.

St. Bernard suggests we consider the Gospel's invitation to embrace Jesus as a friend. Far into Jesus' relationship with his disciples in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that his relationship with them has evolved, Jesus says, "I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. Instead I call you friends." St. Bernard invites us to love God not out of fear like a slave for a master, not out of a sense for reward like a pupil for a teacher, but to love God as a friend.

What does it mean to love God as a friend? St. Bernard argued that the love between friends is to love someone for his/her sake alone and for no other motivation. It reminds me of one of the formulas for Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative I have shared with you before, never treat another human being as a means to an end, but rather treat human beings as an end unto themselves. This is the same thing as what St. Bernard was getting at. Friendship looks like love others for his/her sake alone and for no other motivation.

And then something remarkable happens after the resurrection. When Jesus appears before Mary Magdalene, he tells her, "Go tell my brothers and tell them that I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and to your God." Notice that Jesus no longer refers to his disciples as pupils or as friends. After atoning for our sins on the cross and recreating our human nature in the resurrection, Jesus now calls us his brothers and sisters. This is the best way to love the Lord. This is why, in the sacrament of baptism, we believe we are reborn into God's family tree so to speak. In the paschal mystery, we are welcomed as adopted brothers and sisters of the Lord into the heart of the Blessed Trinity. That is the kind of supernatural love God has for us. That is the kind of love God hopes we can have for him and is the kind of love God challenges us to in our relationships with one another. I believe this is what Jesus was getting at when he gave us two commandments, to love God with your whole heart and to love our neighbor.

Obstacles to love:

I think one of the biggest culprits is hurt and the fear that comes with it. We have all been hurt. When we have been hurt, it is hard to forgive, especially if we feel like we are a victim of injustice. When we take the time necessary to take account of the hurt that separates us from loving God and from loving some particularly difficult neighbors or family members, the challenge of the Gospel can sometimes feel too much to bear. If we consider, however, that the commandment to love does not mean you actually have to feel chummy with the people who have hurt you, the commandment becomes easier. We can instead be honest with God how we feel in our prayers, and still offer God a prayer for the souls who are the most difficult to get along with. That kind of prayer is an act of profound love, courageous love, especially if we are hurting. Even if this prayer doesn't always change the reality of our broken relationships (although it can), prayer always helps in here (in the heart), and in our relationships.

The biggest culprits and obstacles to love of course are: egotism, pride, vanity etc. St. Augustine described sin as *incurvatus in se*, the curving inward of the soul. It is hard to love anybody if we become so fixated on ourselves. It is tough for others to love us as

well. This is why sin, properly understood, is a brutal recipe for eternal loneliness. If we consistently use other people as a means to whatever selfish end our ego wants, no one will want to be around us. I mean, who here likes to be around someone who uses you for their selfish purposes, raise your hands?

This is why Jesus invites his disciples to grow in their love for God and neighbor. We can move in our relationship with God from slaves to pupils, giving us authentic teaching on the law and how to live our lives. By living our discipleship, we can move in our relationship with God from pupils to friends. In the paschal mystery, however, Jesus reveals himself to us as our savior, no longer addressing us as friends, but this time, in our baptism, we are now his brothers and sisters, and therefore co-sharers in his human and divine natures. Our celebration of Eucharist underscores that point as we receive into our bodies the real presence of Jesus Christ, body, blood, soul and divinity.

A spiritual exercise this week can be for us to take the time make an account of our relationships with God, is it a relationship based on fear, based on grades and good marks, has it plateaued in a friendship, or are we a brother or sister with the Lord yet? Once we pray about this, we can take some time and meditate on all of our relationships around us, at work, at home, in our country, in our world, the people we interact with, however good or difficult, and ask ourselves the question, “Do I love like I ought?” During respect life month, this can begin with an objective love for all human life, from womb to tomb, and every stage and demographic in in between. This can also challenge us to love ourselves more like we should, as Christ’s commandment to love others “like ourselves” suggests how important this is. This is all accomplished by developing a deeper love for the Creator of life, our almighty God, who loved us first.