

### 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time + 29 Oct 2023 + Matt 22:34-40

Our Gospel today follows a similar theme as last Sunday's, where we hear once again the Pharisees are trying to test Jesus, so as to find some excuse to condemn Him. Whereas last week they tried to bring Him down through political pressure, today they use a question of the Law. That is, what is the greatest commandment? And of course, Jesus passes the test. He first of all quotes the so-called *Shema*—the great “Creed” that devout Jews recite daily: *You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.* But, when it comes to the greatest commandment, we run into a difficulty right off the bat: given all of the confusion of our current cultural context, we have to ask, what exactly does it mean to “love God?” So let's look at this most basic question more deeply.

To begin, we consider what it means to love God *with all or your heart.* In the original context, during the time of Christ, the “heart” was considered to be the place where we make decisions. So we say here that loving God means choosing God, of loving the things He loves, namely righteousness, and hating the things He hates, namely sin. Put simply, we could say that loving God means keeping His commandments. For example, children show love for their parents when they obey them. And so if we love God, we will recognize His authority over us and so choose to keep the commandments that He has given us. Now, a lot of people live at what we might call this most “basic level” of love. It is important, to be sure. But we also sense here that there must be more to loving God.

So next, Jesus says to love God with *all of your soul.* Again, in its context, the soul is the life-breath of a person: their vitality, uniqueness, their “personhood.” So perhaps this is where feelings come in. Maybe when I recognize an answered prayer, I feel a sense of gratitude for God's goodness to me deep in my soul. Perhaps after receiving Holy Communion, I may feel a special closeness to Him. Or after receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I may feel His mercy flood over me. My soul may be lifted up to Him in a song of praise, or in bowing down in adoration. These consolations indeed are authentic ways of loving God. But there is another challenge: if love is known primarily in good feelings, what happens when I don't feel them? Am I doing something wrong? Have I “fallen out of love,” as they say in movies? We know that it is impossible to manufacture good feelings when they are absent. So, love still must be more than mere good feelings.

Finally, Jesus says to love God with *all of our minds.* So if we love God, we will think with the mind of God. This is where the *will* comes into play, and so completes the picture of love. St. Thomas Aquinas defines love as *willing the good of the other person for their own sake.* I think this is an extremely helpful definition, so let me say it again. So if I really love someone, I will act toward that person in a way that is best for them, regardless of what I get out of it, be it good or ill. In fact, seeking God's will above all, making His will your greatest desire, is the highest form of loving God. Jesus even taught us to pray this way.

I think we can see here, if we are honest, why loving of God is very hard. Self-giving, or sacrificing, goes against our self-seeking, fallen nature, and is only really possible by grace. And so this is key: in the end, we cannot keep the greatest commandment by our own strength. Yes, we can keep the 10 commandments. We might be able to have some good feelings toward God. But to align our will to God's, especially when it is hard, is nearly impossible. And so God had to go first; He had to love us first. St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans ch. 5: *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (v.8). God willed our greatest good—our salvation—so much, that he did the unthinkable: He sent His Son to die for us. And so St. John writes in his 1<sup>st</sup> letter, chapter 4, that great ode to the love of God: *In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins* (9-10).

And so now that we know that God loved us first, in fact, loved us to the very end—even to the point of death on a Cross, we know that we can trust Him. We know that His commandments must be a manifestation of His love. We know that He loves us with a tender, emotional love, in the heart of the person of Jesus Christ. We know that He always wills our highest good, even if it means the greatest sacrifice to Himself. So we *should* love Him in return. But again, given our sinful nature, let's face it: so often, we don't.

And so that is why God even gave us His Spirit—the love between the Father and the Son—to enable us to love Him in return. St. Paul writes again in Romans 5: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us*. So the Holy Spirit, given to us at Baptism, is the way, that we are given the power to truly love God. So St. John continues in ch. 4 of his letter: *by this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit*.

But there is one more missing piece here. Jesus adds to the *Shema* in His answer to the Pharisee that the 2<sup>nd</sup> greatest commandment is to *love your neighbor as yourself*. If we truly love God, we must love what, or "who" God loves: and that is all of us, His children. Not just the people we like, agree with, or are at least somewhat deserving. God manifested His love in dying even for sinners—even for those who didn't love Him. So St. John concludes ch. 4 of his 1<sup>st</sup> letter: *If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen*.

And this, finally, completes the picture and answers our question of how to love God: with all of our heart, soul, mind, and in our relationships with others. All of this is only possible by the grace of the Holy Spirit. And so we should ask for a daily outpouring of the Spirit in our own hearts and on our Church, so that we can truly love God as He first loved us.