

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Matthew 22: 34 – 40

An old couple was sitting by the fireside. He looked over at her, had a romantic thought, and said, “After fifty years, I’ve found you tried and true.” The wife’s hearing wasn’t very good, so she said, “What?” He repeated, “After fifty years, I’ve found you tried and true.” “After fifty years, I’m tired of you too,” she replied.

Jesus pulls a fast one in today’s Gospel. A lawyer comes up to him with a simple question: choose from all the commandments one that is the greatest. Jesus answers the lawyer but instead of choosing one commandment he chooses two.

And if we look carefully at his response we can find in one of the commandments a third commandment. Instead of coming up with one commandment that is the greatest, Jesus offers three.

First, we are to love God with all of our strength. Second, we are to love our neighbor. But we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. So, the third commandment is that we love ourselves.

If you were to ask Jesus, then, what is the great commandment, he would offer this triple commandment of love: love of God, love of self, love of neighbor.

He would suggest that this is God’s greatest revelation of how we should act. It is that upon which everything else hangs—both the law and all the prophets. So, since this is so important and central a revelation, we should spend a little time reflecting upon it.

We can do so by asking ourselves why does Jesus choose three commandments and what are their relationships to each other?

We can start with the command which is most obvious, the commandment to love our neighbor. Now neighbor here is not the person who lives next door. Neighbor is anyone we meet, anyone at all. Our neighbor is everyone in the world.

The commandment is we are to love our neighbor. The necessity of this commandment is clear, and its impact cannot be underestimated. Imagine what a different world we could live in, if we could follow this one commandment, if people could relate to one another out of love instead of out of jealousy, greed, and resentment.

To follow this commandment would truly change our world. Yet it is a difficult commandment to follow. Why is it that so often we are unable to love our neighbor? We move now to the second commandment: **love of self**.

We are so often unable to love our neighbor because we do not have a genuine love of self. Only those who genuinely love themselves are able to love others. Those who consider themselves unworthy and unlovable have no love to give.

Those whose dominant attitude is one of failure or anger can only strike out to others in jealousy, hatred, or perhaps even violence. In order to genuinely follow the first commandment we must follow the second.

We must love ourselves so that we are able to extend love to others. But then how do we establish an adequate love of self? Here the believer knows where to turn – to the third commandment: we are to love God with all our strength.

It is when we understand God's love for us and can respond to God in love that we discover our worth and our value. God's love is unconditional and transformative.

When we embrace God's love for us despite all of our mistakes and failings then we understand our true worth and value. Then we can love ourselves, and through that love others.

The great commandment according to Jesus is the triple commandment of love, to embrace God's love for us, so that we

can come to an adequate love of self, so that we can extend that love to others.

This commandment of Jesus is not only striking poetry. It is a very practical truth that we can apply to our own lives. When we face other people who are difficult to love, people who irritate us, people who have hurt us, people whose attitude and stance is contrary to what we understand or can appreciate, we sometimes try to love them by finding good in them.

But often it is our blindness to their goodness that is the problem in the first place. Therefore, a more successful way to love those that are difficult to love is by finding goodness in ourselves, by remembering that we are chosen sons and daughters of God.

By remembering how we have been blessed, how often we have been forgiven for our failings, how frequently we have been lost and God has found us and saved us, how God's love for us is unconditional, we can gain a sense of how we are worthy and lovable in God's eyes.

It is by claiming God's love for us that we can find the freedom to spread love to others, even when they are difficult to love.

There is not enough love in our world. All of us can come up with excuses why other people do not deserve our love. It is then that we must remember that we do not deserve God's love and yet God loves us nevertheless.

When we can claim that unconditional love that God has for us, we will be free to love others. Then, and only then, will we know the mystery of living Jesus' greatest commandment. AMEN.