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A message about God's love

Thomas Gumbleton | Oct. 27, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

Now as we continue our reflection on this part of Matthew's Gospel that we've been considering for the last three or four Sundays, we find once more that through a confrontation with the religious leaders, Jesus is teaching us something very important about ourselves, about God and about our relationship with God. Today, probably, it's the most fundamental part of the teaching of Jesus that we really need to take to heart because this has to do with the most basic of our relationships: our relationship with God and then with our brothers and sisters in the human family.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Exodus 22:20-26
Psalm 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51
Thessalonians 1:5c-10
Matthew 22:34-40
Full text of the readings [1]

That relationship, Jesus insists, must be based upon love. First of all, love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole mind, your whole soul and your whole strength. This passage, in fact, Jesus takes from the very famous daily Jewish prayer called the Shema. Here, it is named after the first word of the passage in the Book of Deuteronomy, which begins, "Hear, oh Israel: God is our God, God alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength."
This is a very fundamental part of the Jewish law, the most basic. When the Pharisees were challenging Jesus to say which is the greatest of all the laws, they were in some ways trying to trap Jesus because there were the Ten Commandments, of course, given by God through Moses, that established the covenant between the chosen people and God. "I will be your God and you are my people." These are the commandments that reinforced that covenant.

Then as time went on over the hundreds of years that the chosen people were continuing life within that covenant, they developed the Torah, 613 other very specific laws and regulations. All of these were very important, and they were enforced very strictly. So if Jesus, among all these laws, were to pick out this one or that one, he could be challenged. What about this or what about that? So in a way, Jesus just goes beyond those laws, those rules, those regulations, and speaks about our fundamental relationship with God.

It can hardly be called the law. You can't be commanded to love someone. This is the foundation of all the laws, of all the teachings of the prophets. So Jesus is insisting that we must love God above all, before all, before anything else. Now I think it comes to mind for many of us that there might be a question. Why do you love God? God is a mystery. When we link of love, we usually think of our feelings, our emotions, where we are attracted to another person because of what we see or hear, how that person acts or the kind of interaction we can have with people.

We develop a fondness, an emotional attachment, but that's not something we can do with God, is it? So how do we love God, this God who is beyond all of our human intellectualizing, imagining, and thinking? I think one of the first things that would help us to understand what it means to love God would be to understand our most basic, most fundamental relationship with God. I think you find this in a passage in the First Letter of John, where John writes. "My dear friends, let us love one another for love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Those who do not love have not known God, for God is love."

Then John goes on to say, "This is love, not that we have loved God, but that God first loved us." God first

loved us, and in St. Paul's letter to the Church at Rome, he points out something that is really extraordinary about this love that God first loved us. When he was speaking to that Church of Rome, he says, "Consider, moreover, the time that Jesus died for us, when Jesus poured forth His love on us and on all creation, trying to transform it through love. Consider that when Jesus did that, we were still sinners and unable to do anything."

Paul points out, "Few would accept to die for an upright person, although for a very good person, perhaps someone would give their life, but see how God manifested God's love for us while we were still sinners." It's the same thing John is saying, "God first loves us," and you can push that even further. Think about our life, our very existence. We have no way to bring ourselves into being, into life, into existence. No, God first loves us by loving us into existence, and by sustaining us at every instant.

If it were not for that sustaining love of God keeping us in existence, we would not be. I've shared this before, but it continues to be a very powerful experience for me to think about, and that is when I first went down to Haiti after that terrible earthquake. I was visiting with a very good friend of mine down there, Father Andre Pierre, who is the rector of the Catholic University. The day of the earthquake, he was scheduled to meet with Archbishop Mio, the Archbishop of Port a Prince, and he was late.

He called and said, "I'll be late, but I'm coming." The Archbishop said, "That's fine. We'll wait for you." When he did get there to the Archdiocesan offices, he pulled into the parking lot and got out of his car. The Archbishop was on a balcony above the parking lot looking down. He waves at him and says, "See you in a few minutes." So Father gets out of the car, walks over to the steps and was going to go up those steps into the building, and he was stopped by someone. He stops and chats for a minute or two.

That's when the earthquake hit. The building came crashing down. The Archbishop was crushed and killed, and many other people in the building were killed. Father Andre was not harmed at all. Some people might think that's because God chose to punish this person and not that person. It's not like that. This is something that's random. It happened, but it made Father Andre realize, At any moment, my life on this earth might be taken away. I have, in some sense, no ultimate control, and my whole existence would disappear at any instant.

When you start letting that truth sink in, you realize what you've been given by God, how God has first loved us. Then our response becomes a response of love, manifested by our thanksgiving, our praise, our joy in being related to God, our joy in being alive and existing, and by those expressions of thanks, praise and joy, we manifest our love for God. We respond to God. We begin to relate to God as one to whom we are totally indebted to or gifted by.

As we continue to nurture this sense, our love for God becomes something that overwhelms us. We can never stop thanking God, praising God, loving God. So that's how we fulfill that first commandment, and perhaps we have to take some time apart once in a while to reflect on this, to experience how much God has given to us, sheerly out of love. We could not have earned it. We can never earn it. God first loves us and never stops loving us. So as we reflect upon that, we become capable of fulfilling that first commandment.

Now that second commandment is like the first, as Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Again, St. John cautions us in regard to this in that first letter. He says, "We, too, are to give our lives for our brothers and sisters. After all, if anyone enjoys the riches of this world, but closes their heart when they see a brother or sister in need, how will the love of God abide in that person? My dear children, let us love not only with words but with our lips in truth and in deed. Love our neighbor as we love ourselves."

Our first lesson today of course makes very clear how love of our neighbor is to be carried out and who among our neighbors we should chose first of all to love. "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not harm the widow or the orphan. In fact, if you lend money to any of my people who are poor, I say to you, do not act like a money lender and charge anyone interest. If ever you

take anyone's cloak as a bledge," you're lending somebody something and you take the cloak as a pledge that what you lend will come back, "You must give it back to that person by sunset for it is all the covering that the person has. Where else will that person sleep?"

It's cold. He needs this cloak. So even if the gift has not been returned, you give the pledge back for the night. What is God telling us here in this passage from the Book of Exodus? It's that we have to reach out to those who are in need. How can we say we love God if we see a brother or sister in need and don't do something, especially the most neglected, the poor? It's not hard to apply this commandment in our current circumstances.

In the political discussions that are going on now because we're preparing for elections, one of the big issues is immigration. What's happening in our country? In that Book of Exodus, you should not wrong or oppress a stranger. When immigrants come, you cannot wrong them or oppress them. Welcome them. Is that the attitude you find in our country? No, it isn't really on the part of the majority, and certainly not on the part of those who are running for high office. They're denouncing the immigrants, pushing them away, building walls, making laws to make it almost impossible for them to survive.

They're forcing them to go into hiding and eventually forcing them out of our country. How can you say the love of God is in your heart? That's what we're challenged by John to think about. In that book of Exodus again, the orphans and widowed, these are the most vulnerable, the poor among us, the children. How are we reaching out to them? We're in a financial crisis, so where are we cutting? Education and services for the poor. How can we say we love God when we see a brother or sister in need and do not reach out to them or make policies that do not consider them first?

In 1986, the Catholic Bishops wrote a pastoral letter we call The Economics Pastoral, and in there, there is one of the really important things that guide us in our individual lives, but also in our life as a society: how to guarantee that we're going to live the Second Commandment. We suggest that when, as a parish community or as a civil community, when we're making decisions about how we're going to use our resources, we must always ask three questions: what will this decision do to the poor? What will it do for the poor? How will the poor participate?

When we ask those questions, we're putting the poor first, and then we go on and disperse the rest of our resources accordingly. Love your neighbor as yourself, the second of the greatest commandments. The first and the second: Love God and love your neighbor. What could happen in our society, in our world if we who say we follow Jesus listened deeply today and began to consider how to change our lives in order to fulfill these two commandments? What would happen is described in our second lesion this morning where Paul is praising these new Christians in the City of Thessalonica.

They've only been Christian for a short time. He has left them now, but he is writing back to them and he tells them, "You became followers of us and Jesus when on receiving the Word you experienced the joy of the Holy Spirit in the midst of great opposition. Then you became a model for the faithful of Macedonia and Achaia, since from you the Word of Jesus spread to Macedonia and Achaia, and still further. The faith you have in God has become Good News in so many places that we need say no more about it."

In other words, Paul is congratulating them because they live the message of Jesus. They love God. They love their neighbor. People notice it. People are attracted to it, so the Word of God spreads. The world is transformed, gradually becoming the Reign of God. That is what will happen when you and I hear the Gospel today, hear the first and second, the greatest of the commandments, and live them. The Reign of God will be breaking forth wherever we carry out this commandment: love God with your whole heart, mind and soul and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Homily given at St. Leo Church, Detroit, Mich.]

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