

Matt. 22:34-46

When Jesus is put on the spot by the religious leaders in our Gospel lesson today, they ask him to tell them what the greatest commandment is and he responds with, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now how many commandments do you think Jesus had to choose from? (Shout out a number)

In Jesus' day and according to Jewish tradition, the Scriptures contained 613 commandments.... A few more than the 10 commandments we traditionally think of. When Jesus answers their question he is actually quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Here is the first command in the original version from Deuteronomy 6:5: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

So the religious leaders of the day probably would have agreed with Jesus that this was indeed one of the most important commandments because it makes up part of the famous "Shema" of Scripture (the famous Jewish concept of one God). But if we read a little further in this passage we learn the importance of this particular commandment to God. It says, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

If you've ever seen the little boxes that Jews sometimes wear on their foreheads or the black binding on their left wrist, called tefilin, these are in fact boxes filled with some of the key Hebrew commandments including this one from Deuteronomy 6. Some Jewish traditions would argue that wearing these commands was not to be taken literally but was one of focus, of keeping the commands at the forefront of one's mind and heart at all times. But let's take it another step deeper: to love God with one's "heart" actually meant with one's will, love is not a feeling, but a purposeful act of the will, a choice. And to love God with one's heart meant with one's entire life by choice.

So what does loving God and neighbor with our lives actually look like on a daily basis? Here is where I think we often get lost or hung up on this sweeping sounding command. It sounds really hard and complicated – and while it may be hard, it's actually rather simple. And here we can take a cue from St. Therese of Lisieux who famously taught how to love through what she called "the little way." The little way was simple – but not easy. It involved loving a person by acting loving towards them in the moment-despite or even especially when we didn't feel like it. One of my favorite stories is when she described the suffering she endured whenever she was in the presence of a particularly annoying fellow nun. This particular nun was one of those people that angered or annoyed everyone and was very hard to love (you might someone like this). St. Therese describes sitting next to her at a meal one day and notes how everything about this woman bothered her. Besides being rude and difficult to talk to, this nun also made an extremely annoying clicking noise with her mouth while she ate and St. Therese writes rather dramatically about how difficult it was for her to listen to this sound which seemed to highlight how annoying the woman was. Therese was squirming with frustration and sweating just enduring this woman at the meal, but she was determined that she would exude only patience and love towards this nun no matter how difficult it was. And she succeeded. Over the years St. Therese always treated this nun with charity, no matter how difficult she was to be around, and eventually came to genuinely love this woman, despite the enormous struggle, so much so that the nun told people after St. Therese died that she was St. Therese' "favorite" among the nuns. In being faithful to love a sister in her own community in this small way, Therese left a great spiritual legacy: an example of what it means to do small things with great love. In following the little way, Therese was on the path to sainthood and was absolutely fulfilling the greatest commandment.

A story from my own life comes to mind that, when examined from all sides, might shed some light on what it might look like to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. When I was living in St. Louis we lived on a very busy street in quaint Victorian neighborhood. A major intersection was a few yards from the house and one fall night around 8pm I heard a loud crash – it was a noise that just didn't sound good. I looked out the window and could see a person laying in the middle of the road. I immediately ran outside to see what happened and I was met with one of the most unsettling things I've ever seen – it was a small elderly woman who had been hit by a car -she was barely clinging to life- her head was misshapen with tire marks

across it. Two men quickly accompanied men into this busy intersection and another woman was standing on the sidewalk crying loudly. I tried to piece it together – as it turns out, a drunk driver had hit the woman, slowed down, but then suddenly sped away and left- a hit and run. The 2 men and the woman on the sidewalk had witnessed it. I immediately knelt down and held her hand. She was breathing but it was obvious she was fighting for life. The two men stood near us, trying to direct the speeding cars around us and around her- some vehicles were speeding by at 50 miles an hour just a foot or two away from us. One of them called 911. The only thing I could do was pray, hold this woman's hand, and say to her repeatedly, "It's okay, we're here, help is coming. It's okay, they're going to help you, you're not alone." The ambulance came and took her away and I made my way to the sidewalk as the police were arriving to take statements. I prayed with the woman who had witnessed it as she was clearly in a place of trauma herself. Eventually everything was cleared up and we went our separate ways. I learned later from a friend that the woman who had been hit lived, her survival being called a miracle, and that she was undergoing physical therapy to learn to walk again. In addition, the man who had hit her was found and arrested by the police later that night, thanks to the descriptions of the witnesses.

Here is what I learned that day about love – I learned that we all had a role to play in loving our neighbor in that moment – it was not the same role but it was our role – the role we had been given. Witnesses to the accident had a role – they could stay or leave – some didn't stop. But three people stayed and spoke to the police. Those nearby when it happened, like me and other drivers had the chance to stop and attend to scene or to just carry on. The drivers coming through the intersection after the accident also had a role to play- they could either slow down and drive cautiously through the intersection as they passed us or they could continue to rush past on their way to wherever they were going and thereby endangering everyone. The police and the ambulance workers had a role to play in responding quickly and effectively. The drunk driver had a role to play -had he chosen to love his neighbor he never would have been driving drunk – and he certainly would have stopped after hitting the woman. Those of us on the scene formed a team of neighbors that night– each of us doing what we could to help in a crisis. But it doesn't require a crisis to show love to God and our neighbors. And here's the key point; We are always, every day, being offered moments of decision – moments to love God and our neighbors or not. We don't have to go far to find those opportunities, they

come to us and are made known to us all the time. We get to follow the little way if we so choose: We can choose the act of love in any given moment with any given person or we can refuse to take part in the invitation to love our neighbor. It is really that simple...but not always easy.

Amen.