

By Father Charles Bowes

Deuteronomy 6:2-6
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 12:28-34

Love God, neighbor and self – we can't do one without the others

The late Charles Schultz had a wonderful subtle way of sneaking profound insights into the apparently simple statements of his youthful cartoon characters.

For example, Charlie Brown's friend Linus once made the mistake of confessing to his sister Lucy that he wanted to be a doctor when he grew up. Lucy was surprised to hear this and she responded in her typical acid-tongued fashion: "You a doctor? That's a laugh! You could never be a doctor! You know why? Because you don't love humankind!" Linus thought about this devastating critique for a moment and responded, "I do too love humankind! It's people I can't stand." No less a figure than singer and songwriter Joan Baez, who has performed before hundreds of thousands of adoring fans over the last thirty-five years, recently remarked, "The easiest kind of relationship for me is with ten thousand people. The hardest is with one."

Along comes Jesus in Mark chapter twelve proclaiming, quoting the great sh'ma of Deuteronomy: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength...you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

Some believers are more able to love God than they are inclined to love their neighbors. A God whom they cannot see is easier to love than the guy they know across the street who doesn't mow his lawn often enough or the woman around the block who drives too fast or the underage teenagers who stand by the local Seven-Eleven smoking illegally. But Jesus is very specific – Jesus calls us to love them as we love God.

Other believers have a harder time seeing the need to love God. Is it not simply enough to take care of those around them? What does God have to do with that? They can't imagine that a distant God could ever provide the company or compassion that they receive from other people: spouses, family members and friends. How could a God whom they don't see ever provide the warmth or vitality of those who filled up their days with laughter, hugs and tears? Yet Jesus calls us to love God too – as much as we love ourselves.

I think we are apt to separate these commandments and try to compartmentalize our lives – loving God here...loving neighbor there...and hopefully somehow we can survive it all. But the great insight of the fine teachers of Judaism and of Jesus is that God is one...and that means nothing, *nothing*, is to be preferred to God. He is the one. Things that are very attractive, like money, or power, or success, or even

children and family, all can become gods for us. To love God does not exclude all other loves; it *includes* them. The charge that Moses gave and Jesus affirmed is that we are to love this God with heart and soul, mind and strength. And in doing that...we of necessity just have to love neighbor and self.

We, gathered about this table of bread and cup and Word, this community of faith, reminds us that the commandments of Jesus are not presented in an either/or style. We love God by loving those around us, and we love those around us by loving God. Both are fruits of God's loving us, and the tradition has formed us to experience that loving God and loving neighbor are not easily separable. Quite the contrary, love of neighbor keeps us real, makes us put teeth into our vague sentiments of love for God, asks that we take part in the often difficult task of human interaction and growth. Ms. Baez and Linus are right – it is so much easier to love the group, to love humanity in general – maybe this says more about our love of God than it says about our love of neighbor.

I found it interesting that in Baron von Hugel's study of sanctity through the centuries he observed that it was not an accident that saints who were married by the ends of their lives were founding hospitals and orphanages and homes for the poor. It was a natural outgrowth of their love of one another and of God – they just couldn't help themselves. Want to know how good we are at loving God? Ask ourselves what's the quality of our love of our neighbor. Do we want to know how good we are at loving our neighbor? Ask ourselves how good we are at loving God.

The historian of religions, Huston Smith, comments, "There has been a great deal of controversy over the originality of Jesus' teachings. Possibly the most balanced view is the one of the great Jewish scholar Klausner. 'If you take the teachings of Jesus separately,' he wrote, 'you can find every one of them paralleled in the Old Testament or its commentary, the Talmud. If, on the other hand, you take them as a whole, they have an urgency, an ardent, vivid quality, and abandon, and above all a complete absence of second rate material that makes them refreshingly new.'"

Let us pray: "Gracious God, source of our life and hope, let our love for you and for ourselves express itself in our eagerness to do good for others. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen."

Love God, neighbor and self –
we can't do one without the others.