

Homily for October 27, 2002  
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Exodus 22:20-26  
1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10  
Matthew 22:34-40

## *To love God, neighbor, and self is more of a way of life than a commandment.*

The commandment from Jesus today in Matthew chapter 22 is love God and neighbor and self, and we are told that on this commandment hangs the whole of the Law and the Prophets. Saint Matthew does not tell us who our neighbor is.

In Saint Luke's version of this story Jesus is asked, "Who is my neighbor?" And he responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story that serves to tell us that our neighbors are not just the people who are physically, socially or ethnically close to us, but anyone who is in need. Although Saint Matthew's version of the story lacks this dimension, our first reading from the book of Exodus, chapter 22, fills the gap. There the Israelites are told to have special care for the stranger, for those on the margins and for the poor.

Love God, neighbor, and self. We can recognize immediately the rightness of this answer. Surely anyone who loves his or her neighbor would not steal, kill, slander, covet or commit adultery, just as anyone who truly loves God would keep the Sabbath and worship God alone. Other Jewish scholars said much the same thing even before Jesus came up with it. But Jesus' statement is more than a summary of the

commandments; it offers a total way of looking at God. Not only does loving God teach us to love other people, but loving other people teaches us to love God. The first is great, and the second is directly related to it. Most religious people would agree that loving God is the definitive purpose and activity of our lives; worship of the true and living God is what makes us who we are and is our reason for being. Some church goers, however, display great fervor and still disregard the needs of others. On the other hand, we know atheists who are great humanists, who outdo most Christians in caring for their neighbors. Jesus is unwilling to name only one commandment; the three are inextricably intertwined – God, self, and neighbor.

Jesus goes further by showing that something is needed in addition to the commandments or the law. Can we really command or coerce someone to love another person? Can we in any sense command a person to love God? The lawyer in the scripture passage would have had difficulty making these commandments stand up in court. If we post the Ten Commandments, or even the two greatest commandments, on the walls of all our schools, however well intentioned, would it make any difference? Would it make the students who are agnostic or atheist love a God they don't believe in?

Would it make students, especially those whose lives are so hate-filled that they can't really see others as fellow human beings – would it make them love anyone, even themselves? How can we be commanded to feel in a particular way?

But the love demanded by this commandment is not about feelings. It's about an attitude. An attitude that is determined to work for the good of my neighbor, whoever he/she may be. An attitude that puts the well-being of others on equal footing with my own well-being. It rejects revenge and seeks justice with mercy. In doing so it breaks the cycle of fear that leads to a cycle of conflict. This love is not dependent on the other deserving it. Nor does it seek any repayment. Elsewhere, Jesus specifically rules out such a conditional love. The love we are called to is none other than an imitation of the love of God which is by definition pure gift, since we have nothing with which to "repay" God which does not already belong to God, even if we wanted to make such a repayment. This is why, in Saint John's version of this commandment, he says, "If God has loved you, you should love one another." To love God is not a sufficient response. The only adequate response to God's love is to offer that love to others and to ourselves. To know what that love looks like – we look at Jesus Christ. A question I ask flowing from this gospel – a question which allows me to be open to God in Jesus runs this way: "Lord, how did you find a balance in your life to love God, yourself, and others?"

For centuries people have sought a balance in love of God, neighbor, and self. There is a proverb that comes to us, I think, from Persia which goes:

"I sought my God; my God I could not see. I sought my soul; my soul eluded me. I sought my neighbor, and I found all three."

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