

Homily of Thirty First Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, 2024

Deuteronomy 6:2-6; Psalm 18:2-4, 47, 51; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34

The Book Deuteronomy contains laws and exhortations Moses gave to the Israelites that would guide them when they arrived at the Promised Land. Today's first reading contains the central statement of belief of the Jewish people known as Shema Israel. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Moses went further to instruct, "Keep repeating them to your children. Recite them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:7).

The Hebrew word 'Shema' means listen or hear or pay attention or focus on or respond to what you hear. You call me 'Father.' Yes, I am your spiritual father. You are my spiritual children. Therefore, I will not stop repeating to you, continually, the word of God with my whole heart, and my whole being, and my whole strength. I recite it to myself continually. So, do the same to yourself and to your children, whether you like it or not and whether they like it or not. That is the command!

At the time of Jesus, some teachers and interpreters of the law emphasized that the more burnt offerings and sacrifices the people offered, and the more tithes the people paid, the closer they were to God. The scribe, an interpreter of the law, most likely wanted to know Jesus' opinion. Jesus replied by quoting the Shema Israel and added Leviticus 19:19, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The amazed scribe acknowledged that to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself are "worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." We recall that Jesus, in Luke 11:12, condemned the Pharisees, "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and love of God." Even now, does Jesus not condemn prosperity preachers whose priority is on their congregation's paying of tithes over and above love of God and love of neighbor?

Love of God and love of neighbor are like the two hinges of a door. One of the hinges is love of God, and the other hinge is love of neighbor. If any of the hinges is absent, the door ceases to function. 1 John 4:19-21 says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."

At creation, God said, "Let us create man in our image, in the likeness of ourselves..." (Genesis 1:26). We share in God's divine nature. Therefore, we have done to God what we have done to others since each of us is God's image. In Matthew 25:40 Jesus teaches, "In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." In Acts 9:4-5, Jesus asked Saul, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul asked Jesus, "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Jesus did not ask Saul why he was persecuting the Christians, but "Why are you persecuting me?"

We can see the power of love of neighbor in the following texts: "Above all, let your love for one another be intense (strong), because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). "We are aware that we have passed over from death to life because we love our brother. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer..." (1 John 3:14-15). "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). "And now, these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

The word 'love' is the most used and abused word. All kinds of evil, atrocities, senseless things, and bad decisions are committed in the name of love. But there is such a thing as genuine love, which is why St. Paul tells us, "Let love be genuine..." (Romans 12:9). Jesus teaches us what genuine love is where he says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son..." (John 3:16). "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Kinds of genuine love we must pursue: (1) Sacrificial love, which is a total self-giving that sometimes culminates to ultimate sacrifice. Doing good to those who hate us is a type of sacrificial love. (2) Unconditional love, which is a selfless act of love that does not require anything in return. (3) Altruistic love is a kind of love that involves taking helpful actions to support and benefit others, often at one's expense. Whatever anyone calls love or does in the name of love, which does not fall within these three kinds, is counterfeit love! One may ask about reciprocal love. Reciprocal love, which is love in return for love, has a selfish undercurrent.

I would like to conclude with this story: A boy was asked to donate blood to his sister so that his sister would not die. After donating the blood, the boy asked his dad, "When am I going to die." The boy had thought that for him to donate blood to the sister so that she might not die would result to his own death. Yet, he did not object when the request was made of him. St. Ignatius prayed, "To give without counting the cost." This boy teaches us the meaning of the prayer.

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