

30th Sunday Ordinary Time Year "A"

October 25, 2020

Readings: Exodus 22: 20-26; 1 Thess 1:5-10; Matthew 22:34-40

Yes, I cringe each time that I come across the holy card I produced for my priestly ordination. The photo makes me look about as old as our alter servers, and I realize the passage of time. But the back of the card makes me smile for a different reason. The passage I selected was repeated in today's Gospel, which itself directly quotes a passage from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy. They most central prayer in Judaism:

Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad.

"Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

The Shema is used as a centerpiece of all Jewish prayer services and closely echoes the monotheistic message of Judaism. It is considered the most important prayer in Judaism, and its twice-daily recitation is a *mitzvah* (religious commandment). It is quoted in our Gospel for today.

I chose it because a year before my ordination, I was privileged to attend a study program for six weeks in Israel. It was a spiritual eye opener and I began to see the Scriptures in a new light, including the Old Testament. Much of what I learned that summer I imagine has faded with time, but the respect for God's Word has never faded. What struck me about the *Shema* prayer was how I saw evidence of it all around, beginning with the doorposts of practically every Jewish home I saw.

It is called a mezuzah, literally meaning doorpost. A mezuzah is a piece of parchment that is contained in a decorative case and inscribed with this prayer in Hebrew Deuteronomy 6:4-9. It also contained a second passage from the 11th chapter. It is customary to touch the mezuzah every time one passes by the door and then kiss the fingers that touched it. It is NOT a good luck charm; it ought to be prayed deliberately and reflectively. Deuteronomy 6:9 commands that "Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates."

Do we approach each day with the sincere desire to love the Lord with our whole heart, being and strength? It continues, “take to heart these words which I commanded you today.” If you said that prayer multiple times per day, it would surely sink in and be a reminder of our duty before the Lord.

Jesus lifts this Old Testament passage and augments its teaching, by teaching us that to truly love God of necessity includes the love of neighbor. He links the two inexorably, and henceforth they have been so seen. This is a major advancement in the teaching of Christ, and one by which we measure ourselves. He tops it off by saying that the entire law and the prophets depend on these two commandments—literally, it means that they ‘hang’ (*krematai*) on these two commandments.¹

Jesus both simplifies the faith, as well as challenges us to more. He simplifies it by paring it down to the very basics. However, to live the fullness of the faith is now more difficult than ever, because we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves, yes, including those whose lawn signs these days may well signal our many significant differences!

We often think about ourselves, we are concerned about ourselves, we pray for ourselves, and we look out for ourselves. Jesus challenges us to then do the same for one another. New parents learn early on that the focus of their life is now squarely centered on their children—they learn this in a way I simply will never know as a priest.

However, you are all my neighbors, and I am called to love you as I love myself. All of you—not just some. Every day brings with it plenty of chances to demonstrate care and concern for each other—and every day we must ask God for the power to love Him above all—with all our heart, soul, and mind.

¹ Κρεμάννυμι- A prolonged form of a primary Greek verb; to hang

St. Mother Teresa once remarked: “Everyday on awaking, my desire and my enthusiasm is this: today I must do something beautiful for God. What is there that I can do better for God than to console the distressed! Wipe away the tears of those who weep, be a refuge to the abandoned, pour love into the hearts of the unloved.”²

As we wait impatiently in our cars on a crowded Randolph Ave., in line at the grocery store or become exasperated when you realize you forgot to bring your mask with you—step back, take stock and take a deep breath. Ask yourself if you love God with all that you have. Ask yourself if you have done something beautiful for God today, a good deed, some act of kindness or virtue.

Ask if you are being patient with your neighbor, as you hope they are with you. Take the words of this simple Gospel to heart—it is much more difficult than it sounds! That is why it truly is the greatest of all the commandments!

² “Do Something Beautiful for God: The Essential Teachings of Mother Teresa” 365 Daily Reflections, 2019 published by Blue Sparrow