

31st Sunday Ordinary Time Year “B”

October 30-31, 2021

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is Lord alone.

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

Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

When Moses spoke to the people about his vision for their future in which they would prosper, he also gave a roadmap. The roadmap is one of the best-known phrases in all of Sacred Scripture. We are called to love the Lord with all our heart, soul and strength. This is known as the *Shema* prayer. Observant Jews print the passage on a special scroll and place it this Mezuzah on the upper right of the doorpost at an angle.

Taken from the Book of Deuteronomy, the *Shema* is the centerpiece of Jewish piety and signifies the monotheistic tenets of Judaism. Considered the most important prayer in Judaism, its twice-daily recitation is a *mitzvah* (commandment). It appears as well in today’s Gospel. In acknowledging the centrality of love, our Christian faith has retained the core of Israel's faith, while at the same time giving it new depth and breadth.

Jesus united into a single precept this commandment of love for God and love for neighbor is found in the Book of Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lv 19:18; cf. Mk 12:29-31). Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), love is now no longer a mere “command”; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.

Pope Benedict XVI commented on the Deuteronomy passages in the opening paragraphs of his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*:

There is only one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who is thus the God of all. Two facts are significant about this statement: all other gods are not God, and the universe in which we live has its source in God and was created by him.¹

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, paragraph #9.

Today, people attach quite different meanings to the word “love,” making it one of the most difficult to define. We would be wise to learn a lesson from the ancient Greeks, who first distinguished love using several words, among them, *philia*, *eros* and *agape*. These described bonds of friendship, romantic love and unconditional love. His encyclical situates these within the framework of how they apply in Christian tradition.

Philia is the love of friendship, such an important aspect of our lives. We desire friendship– it grounds us, allowing us to enjoy the remarkable journey of life. Many people feel that they do not have as many friends as they would like. I think of the student council election in which a kid said, “Now, I realize I am not the most popular kid in class...but then again, neither are you. So, vote for someone who represents you!”

Eros love is best understood as romantic love. Many experience the challenges to remain disciplined with respect to our passions. So often, *eros* needs to be purified; these are the difficult lessons which our Catholic youth learn and with which they struggle. May they be assured of the Church’s support amidst these challenges to living the virtue of chastity.

When body and soul are intimately united in the bond of Christian marriage, *eros* acquires its full meaning. The Pope notes that the human person is “a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature,” and *eros* is “able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur.”²

And yet, for a reason, *agape* expresses the experience of a degree of love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that too often prevails. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. This is unconditional love that parents exhibit towards their children. It can be all-consuming. Sometimes we surmise that salvation may only be attained through a total giving of ourselves.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), paragraph #5

Children, be aware of the self-sacrificing love of your parents. You're your gratitude both by word and deed. You are never, ever too old to tell your parents that you love them, for in doing so, you are also loving God, who gifted you with your parents in the first place.

And yet, we must all strive each day to love, even in trying circumstances. While it is hard to argue with this, the Holy Father was stressing that as Christians we must also receive love. This is also part of the equation.

Let us be mindful of our need to receive love. It matters little whether we know intellectually that we are loved—we need to hear it from our parents, our children, our spouses. Far from being empty words, they are vital words that we must both hear and speak, for they flow from the very source of love, our love for God the Father. All else flows through Him.

Still, love makes its own demands. It demands transparency and the willingness to share challenging moral truths, in season or out. I hope our young people understand that about their parents' love for them. It is self-sacrificing and unconditional, even as it is challenging.

If we allow ourselves to receive love, we will be stronger Christians. God's statutes and commands will not be as burdensome, because we will see in them a path to peace, happiness, and a long life with God.