

October 29, 2017 – Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

When my son Jon was in high school he was a very disciplined, organized and motivated student. He had a big white board in his room that he'd write his daily "to do" list on. One day I walked into his room and saw the first thing on his list. It was one word: "Love." I was so impressed! And I noticed that it stayed the first thing on his list every day, week after week. If only that were the first thing on everyone's to do list every day! Imagine what the world would be like.

Yet that is exactly what Jesus is telling us in today's Gospel. He's telling us that love – love of God and love of others – is the meaning and purpose of life, and therefore it should be the first thing on our to do list every day.

If love is the meaning and purpose of our existence, then it's important and necessary to take some time each day to reflect on what it means to love. Some questions that come to mind are, what does it mean to love God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, with all my strength? What does it mean to love my neighbor as myself? And who is my neighbor? And what is love?

We use the word "love" in so many different ways in the English language, and it can be confusing. I love pizza. I love my wife. And I'd better mean very different things here! Once a husband and wife who had been married for many years were watching tv and enjoying a bottle of wine. After a few glasses the husband heard his wife say, "I love you!" He looked at her and asked, "Is that you talking, or the wine?" She answered, "It's me talking – to my wine."

We use the word "love" to describe how we feel about things and people that make us feel good. But this is not the love that Jesus is talking about. He's not talking about feeling love. He is commanding us to love God and others, not to feel feelings of love towards them. This love is an action, how we treat God and others, not about how we feel towards them. He didn't command us to feel love towards others, because we're not capable of doing it. We can't make ourselves have loving feelings by an act of the will. It would be nice if we could, but we can't. We can't even always feel loving feelings towards the people that we love the most. So Jesus doesn't command us to do something that we can't.

He does command us to treat others with love, which is to say, with respect, with compassion, justice, with mercy, with kindness. This we can choose to do regardless of how we feel towards them. Our feelings may make it easier or more difficult to treat them with love, but we can still always choose to act in a loving way. That means I can love people when I'm mad at them. I can love people whom I don't like. I can love people who have wounded me. I can always choose to treat them with love.

So what does it mean to love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength? It means to treat God with the highest respect, including God's name. It means to count my blessings every day as gifts from God, and to thank God and praise God continually for these many blessings. It means to use God's gifts in a way that respects God's desires and intentions for them to be used. It

means to continually seek to know God's will and to do it faithfully and wholeheartedly. It means to obey all of God's commandments, humbly and gratefully. And it means above all to prove our love for God by loving others. As St. John writes in his first letter, "Whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." Reflecting on this, St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "Though we do not have our Lord with us in bodily presence, we have our neighbor, who, for the ends of love and loving service, is as good as our Lord himself."

So if loving God means loving my neighbor, it raises the question, "Who is my neighbor?" We all want to know whom it is that we must love, and whom we can ignore. As an American, do I only have to love Americans? As a Christian, only Christians? Are people of other nationalities, religions and races my neighbors? As you can see, this question of whom must I love is very much being debated in our country right now, isn't it? We may not be talking about it that way, but that is indeed what is going on. Not whom do I like, but whom do I treat with respect, justice, mercy and kindness? If I must love my neighbor, who is my neighbor?

When someone asked Jesus this question, he responded by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. And, yes, the parable makes it clear that we are to help those who are in need and never ignore anyone. But Jesus takes this question of who is our neighbor and turns it upside down. When he finishes the story, he asks, "Who was neighbor to the injured man?" His listeners answered, "The one who treated him with compassion." Jesus then said, "Go and do likewise." In other words, the relevant question is not "Who is my neighbor?" but "Who will I be neighbor to?" We are to be good neighbors to everyone.

So now we understand that we are to love God and others – all others - by how we treat them, and that we are to treat them with respect, justice, mercy, compassion and kindness. But we must bring in another dimension to this commandment to love. These two commandments were nothing new to the Jews of Jesus' time. When he said that these were the two greatest commandments, no one was surprised. These commandments were part of the Jewish spiritual DNA. When another person asked Jesus this same question and Jesus responded in the same way, the man exclaimed, "You have spoken well! For to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself is greater than all the sacrifices and burnt offerings." Jesus was simply stating the heart of the Jewish faith. His unique contribution was to show us what love is. At the Last Supper Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you." So now he's defining love not just as respect, justice, mercy, compassion and kindness. He's defining it by what he says and by what he does, how he treats the people around him. He did this because he is love. God is love and Jesus is God, so Jesus is love. He is the very embodiment of love, and as we experience him in our lives, we experience true love, and that love we are to share with everyone.

Robert Wicks is a psychologist, therapist and writer in Christian spirituality. He tells the story of one of his clients, a woman who had been severely abused as a young person. She had all the characteristics of someone who had suffered that abuse, low self-esteem, self-hatred, self-demeaning behavior. She believed that she was worthless because she had been treated that way. But over the course of a year of therapy Wicks saw a complete transformation in her. He asked her, "You're like a new person. How have you accomplished this transformation?" Her answer stunned him: "I've simply started treating myself the way that you've treated me." Wicks had

treated her with respect, with kindness, with compassion. In other words, he had loved her, and his love had transformed her as she accepted it.

This shows us that we have the power to transform others when we treat them with love, and we have the power to deform them when we don't. It also shows us that the love of Jesus for us has the power to transform us, if only we open our hearts to his love. For how can we obey his commandment to love others as he has loved us if we have not first experienced his love for us? So how do we experience his love for us? By being in relationship with him, by living each day with him. Jesus is alive and he lives in our hearts, and we spend time with him each day in prayer, and we encounter him in the Word of God and in sacraments, and in each person that we encounter. Through prayerful awareness we see how he loves us, how he treats us with respect, with mercy, with compassion and kindness. We experience his love for us, and this transforms us. And then we can love others with the same love that he loves us with.

And may love be the first thing on our "to do" list every day!