

Homily for Sunday, October 29, 2023
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time



The very first thing I ever remember watching on our black and white television, back in the late 1960s, was fighting in the Middle East. I was shocked at what I was seeing and wondered, as a three or four-year-old, “Why are they fighting and not loving one another? Why doesn’t someone, from the adult world, just step in and

stop this?” Of course, I didn’t know anything about the complexities of human behavior; I still don’t know much. I was naïve to the fact that personal and collective grudges can be held onto for many generations. I had no idea about prejudice, or ideas of superiority, jealousy, fear, and how these things live one inch under the surface in all of us and are so easily triggered. Fifty some years later, I turn the television on, and they are still fighting in the Middle East and in many other parts of the world. My adult mind goes back to the simple question I had as a four-year old, “Why does this continue? Why can’t we love each other better than we do?” I know the social, political, and religious dimensions are complex, but there must be some way to cut through it all, so that we can love God and neighbour in a better way than we are currently doing.

I think if we were to ask three and four-year-olds to solve societal problems, they would cut to the chase, much like Jesus does in today’s gospel, and tell us straight out, “Just love God and love everyone else, and the rest will look after itself.” Sometimes, the easiest solution, the one right under our noses, is the best. For most of my adult life, I didn’t want to suggest simple or naïve solutions for fear of being thought of as a “simpleton.” Until one day, my friend Jeff told me, “I wouldn’t worry about other peoples’ opinion of you, Phil. They already think you are a simpleton, so go ahead and speak your mind.” (He always had a way of making me feel better).

Jesus responded to the lawyer's question about which commandment in the Law was the greatest. The motive of the lawyer, a Pharisee, was not only to test Jesus but to entrap him. Despite their sinister motives, we get a brilliant answer from Jesus. Underneath the 613 laws of the Jews in his time, and under the 1752 canons that make up The Code of Canon Law for us, Jesus says, "***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.***" And, on equal footing with that law is, "***Love your neighbour as yourself.***"

I know how easy it is for me to take this simple teaching of Jesus and find all kinds of justification for not doing it. I actually may have done better in the world of loving God and loving neighbour as a four-year-old when my thinking process was more simple. One thing I do know is that as a four-year-old, I lived much more from the heart and much less from the Law.

When Jesus gives his brilliant and true answer, he is both quoting and misquoting the Book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy we are told to love God with all our heart, soul, and ***strength***. Jesus says something a little bit different. He tells us to love God with all our heart, soul, and ***mind***. He replaces the word "strength" with the word "mind." It's in our minds we make choices. I think for Jesus, love is more than a feeling and more than the strength of willpower. To love is a choice. Similarly, to "not love" or to be indifferent is also a choice.

St. John says, "We are able to love only because God has first loved us." We are God's choice. God made a choice in loving us and has never regretted that choice. All God wants us to do is to return the favour by loving one another. So, by changing "loving God with all our strength" to "loving God with all our mind," Jesus is telling us we can't will ourselves into loving others. It's not a matter of strength. Love is more a choice of the mind than it is a flexing of the muscles of the will. Without the grace of God working in my life, I cannot find the strength of will to love some people. Thank goodness, learning to love is always a work in progress. It's an ongoing conversion. Conversion literally means "to change your mind." In order to change your mind, you first have to open your mind. Openness, no matter where it came from, was the thing Jesus praised the most when he saw

it in people, because openness always leads to faith, and faith leads to God. Maybe that's why Jesus delighted in the three and four-year-old and told us to welcome them with the same eagerness as we would welcome the Kingdom.

Apart from re-interpreting Deuteronomy, Jesus also said, on the topic of love, ***"I give you a new commandment, love one another as I have loved you"*** (Jn. 13:34). The commandment to love isn't new; it goes back all the way to Leviticus and Deuteronomy. So, what's new? What's new is the part, ***"...love one another as I have love you."*** At some point Jesus just stopped talking about love, suffering, and sacrifice, and he just did it. He went to the Cross for us not looking for praise and thanks, but in the hopes that we would learn from his example and dare to love others as he loved us.

Jesus doesn't throw out the Law and the Prophets so as to promote his own "new and improved" version of the Commandments. He says instead, "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." All other laws must be measured against the two great commands.

If we ignore our neighbour in our embrace of God, it is a self-defeating exercise. The two are inseparable. It's always easier to love the God we don't see and ignore the brother or sister we do see. Some religions can do it. Ours cannot. We cannot step over the homeless to enter our churches. Nor can we return from Mass feeling good about ourselves and still remain determined not to speak to someone. When we don't love, we are divided. When we do love, we are united. And when we are united, we become credible witness to God's love in the world. For people will look at us and say, "See how they love one another."

A crew team made up of Jesuits couldn't get their boat moving in the right direction, let alone moving fast. Every day they'd struggle to get into the boat. If they didn't capsize it, they'd still only get it going in circles. So, they finally sent one of their Jesuit crew members over to spy on what the Franciscans were doing on a nearby lake for their practices. He comes back and tells his fellow

***Jesuits, "We're doing it all wrong. The Franciscans have the secret."
The Jesuits asked him, "What is the secret?" He responded, "They
have eight guys rowing and only one guy yelling!"***

Maybe growing in love of God and neighbour is like that, initially, slow, going in circles, capsizing, and everybody yelling. Then, ever so gradually, we apprentice ourselves to listening to the Master Lover, Jesus, until someone says of us, "See how they love one another."

~Fr. Phil