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Life often demands focus on what we deem important, how we spend our time, what sacrifices we are willing to make and how much it will cost. The rules and resolutions we make are often good indicators of what we consider central to our livelihood.

Such was the life of Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, who in 1517, expressed concern for the livelihood of the church. Luther disseminated ninety-five theses to various church bishops and officials in Wittenberg, Germany asking for a debate on certain issues within the church that he felt were abuses contrary to the Gospel and Jesus' teachings. His bold proclamation set into motion a series of events that would eventually become the Protestant Reformation.

As Luther was confronted by the theologians of his time for his strong convictions, so too was Jesus confronted by the Pharisees regarding the rules good, upstanding Jews should observe. "Which one of the Torah regulations is at the core of all the other commandments?" With so many rules and regulations, some would get more attention than others. The lawyer's question in today's Gospel, while apparently meant to test Jesus, is a legitimate question: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Jesus responds by quoting two commands from the law which, for him, encompasses all the others: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Loving God is the first and the greatest commandment; therefore, by extension, loving neighbor as self is equivalent to loving God. Jesus affirms that “the whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” While this linking was not unique to Jesus, it does get at the heart of Jesus’ mission and ministry.

Matthew had already indicated this link when Jesus gives missionary instructions to his disciples. In sending them out, Jesus assures them that “whoever welcomes you, welcomes me” (Matthew 10:40, NRSV). Matthew later sums up Jesus’ teachings (which is the Gospel reading for the upcoming feast of Christ the King observed on the last Sunday of this liturgical cycle). This fitting conclusion to the liturgical year has the Lord declare: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40, NRSV). Our intimacy with the Lord will be based on the love and intimacy we have shared with all of God’s people.

The reading from Exodus greatly concretizes Jesus’ teaching. The alien, the widow, the orphan and the poor are our neighbors. In most societies, these people are vulnerable in so many ways because they have little or no legal or economic rights, privileges or power. Their survival depends on the goodness, generosity and compassion of others.

We are commanded to treat others with compassion because our loving God is merciful and compassionate towards us, most especially when we are in need. Our God is slow to anger and rich in kindness, not counting our offenses against us. Such loving relationship with God empowers us to call upon God in our need. Jesus and all of Scripture affirm that God hears our cry for help and responds with generosity and compassion. We too need to respond in kind, for we are the living presence and image of God to one another. This demand is difficult for us to practice consistently. With Psalm 18, we acknowledge that only with God’s help do we have the courage and strength to offer compassion and love to all, most especially the poor and powerless.

These readings help us focus on what is important in Christian living. How should attunement to the demands of love and compassion for all of God’s people impact relationships with fellow Christians?

On this last Sunday of October, a date which has long been called “Reformation Sunday” by Protestant denominations, the church commemorates of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. We recall the progress that has been made in reconciliation and mutual understanding between the various Christian churches, especially since the Second Vatican Council.

It is important that as Catholic Christians, we too pay attention to this significant commemoration, recalling it, realistically seeing how we might have contributed to it, seeking reconciliation and always striving for Christian unity. Today’s readings provide an excellent opportunity to expound on what unites us as Christians. These scriptural passages help us focus on the essential aspects of discipleship while letting go of those things that are not crucial or essential to Christian living.

Focusing on what unites us as Christians — love of God and love of neighbor as self — reaffirms that nothing is more important to Christian living than this.

EXODUS 22:20-26

This Exodus selection is from the Covenant Code or the Book of the Covenant, (Exodus 20:22-23:33), immediately following the Exodus account of the Ten Commandments, (20:1-21). This law code is set within the covenant relationship framework which God established with the people through Moses on Mt. Sinai. The law code articulates the practical application of the covenant relationship obligations that God desired for the people in their communal interaction. They are to practice social justice, especially with regards to the poor and powerless. They are to act with justice because God is just and continually manifests love for them, most especially when they are vulnerable and in need. God’s compassion toward us is the model that must motivate all human behavior towards others.

The Covenant Code specifies the obligations that the Israelite community is to have toward those most vulnerable and open to abuse, mistreatment or oppression. The alien, the widow and the orphan are usually grouped together as people who typically have no social, economic or legal rights in a society that is primarily dominated by males and tribal kinship. In such a society, widows and orphans, those who do not have male relations to speak and act on their behalf, are most vulnerable to abuse and oppression. Aliens are usually understood to be permanent residents within the community who have no tribal or kinship ties. As a result they have no one to protect them and no social, economic or familial relationships that

they can rely upon. Aliens, widows and orphans were usually powerless and poor, relying upon the goodness and compassion of others.

Aware of such disparity and powerlessness among community members, God's will and laws demand justice and right relationship. God, attuned to the needs of the poor and powerless, promises to respond when they cry out in their need. God also says that those who do not reach out in compassion and justice towards others in need, will be severely punished, resulting in their becoming poor and powerless.

One example of offering compassion and justice were in making loans. Loans were made not to take advantage of the other but to alleviate economic distress by not charging interest on loans. That meant not taking the cloak or outer garment used by the poor as a sleeping blanket during the cold of the evening.

The directive heard in today's reading to return the outer garment taken in pledge by evening was to show compassion for those who had nothing else to warm themselves. Amos, the strong prophet of justice, excoriates the rich for sleeping upon garments taken in pledge from the poor (2:8). They refused to show compassion or act with justice. God who hears the cry of the poor will respond and bring ruin upon those who take advantage of others. The Covenant Code demands that all be compassionate and just in the manner that God is. This is a powerful message for our time, communally, nationally and worldwide.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:5c-10

Paul praises his beloved Thessalonian community for being a "model for all believers." Their faith is so manifest in their words and actions, that "we have no need to say anything." Their hospitality and compassion towards Paul and his companions is well known, for they have turned from idols and now "serve the living and true God." They manifest God's compassion towards all.

Key to their conversion is the cost of turning away from one's previous beliefs and practices (idols) and turning toward the living and compassionate God, manifested so concretely in the loving sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. Paul praises the community for "receiving the word in great affliction." While not specifying the affliction, it seems obvious that Paul is referring to the cost involved in separating themselves from former patterns, life styles and even economic and social kinship. Paul himself experienced this in his own turning to Christ. He praises the community

for imitating both him and the Lord, who, in the power and grace of the Spirit, did not let adversity or suffering derail them from being faithful to God in living out the Gospel.

The Thessalonian community is a model for all those communities where the word is being preached. Others praise the Thessalonians for being receptive to the word and living it out in joy even in the midst of affliction. Paul praises them for awaiting in joy the coming of the Lord.

The coming wrath that Paul mentions at the end of this passage refers to the eschatological disruption of the world that will result when Christ returns. Christ's return in judgment will be a day of wrath for unbelievers but a day of great hope and joy for all who have received the word and acted upon it. Jesus delivers believers from the coming wrath, and so all believers live in hope, despite present suffering and affliction. We live in hope, anticipating the joy of being with the Lord upon his return.

MATTHEW 2:34-30

This passage from Matthew is set in the midst of various controversies that Jesus encounters with both Sadducees and Pharisees. One of the Pharisees, "a scholar of the law," tested Jesus by first ironically addressing him as teacher and then asking, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" While set in the context of a test, it is obvious from other writings that this was a concern among the Jewish community of Jesus' day. The possibility of not being able to follow through completely on all of the 613 Torah commandments led the community to prioritize some over others. Choosing certain commandments over others led to controversy among scholars of the law. Jesus responds not so much by choosing one commandment over the others, but rather by explicating the underlying principles that govern the carrying out of all commandments.

Jesus combines two commandments from the Torah, stating that the second is like the first. The first, from Deuteronomy, is an integral part of the Shema (6:4-9), the daily prayer and primary confession of the Jewish community. It calls for love of God with one's whole being — heart, soul and mind. Jesus calls this the first and greatest commandment. Then he adds a second, saying it is like the first. Quoting Leviticus 19:18, Jesus states, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love of neighbor in Leviticus is explicated in a very practical, real and just manner. Key to love of

neighbor is right relationship, the Jewish understanding of justice. Others in Jesus' day had also linked these two commandments. Jesus not only approves of this linkage, but affirms that these linked commandments are at the core of all his teachings.

For Matthew's Jesus love of God and neighbor as self are the interpretive key to what the "kingdom of heaven" is like. The final sentence of today's passage clearly expounds what is essential in living in fidelity to God's will and purpose: "The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." The law and the prophets are synonyms for all of God's revealed word. Jesus is saying that these two commandments are the lens, criteria and basis for carrying out all the other commandments.

Matthew's Jesus also expands Jewish understanding of the neighbor. In Leviticus 19 neighbor is understood to be only a fellow Israelite. However in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus clearly states that God desires us to love enemies and to pray for those who persecute you (5:43-44). In other words, the care and concern for the neighbor is thoroughly inclusive and expansive. It includes the entire human family: the loved one and the enemy. It demands not just general concern for the other but very specific demands of attunement to the needs of the other and the obligations to meet those needs. These two passages specify the obligation to feed, clothe, visit and care for the other no matter the circumstances.

These commandments are the core of our living in fidelity to God and to one another, especially our fellow Christians. Jesus' directives form the core of Christian living and unite in a very profound manner all those who have committed themselves to Christian discipleship. As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, let us strive for that unity Jesus prayed for his disciples in John 17, "that they may all be one."

Planning: 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

by: Lawrence Mick

What do you think might happen if you stood up in the halls of Congress and proclaimed today's first reading? No doubt you would quickly be removed from the room. Would members of our ruling bodies respond to the commands of God

recorded in Exodus?

Maybe we should also consider what might happen in your parish assembly when this text is proclaimed this weekend. Will your hearers recognize that God's commands apply today just as much as they did when this passage was written?

God tells the Israelites not to "molest or oppress" the aliens in their midst. The reason is significant: They were once aliens themselves, so they should recognize aliens as people like themselves who deserve to be treated with kindness and justice. Does not the same principle apply to most of us who live in North America? Only Native Americans can claim not to have alien heritage, though even their ancient ancestors came to these lands from elsewhere. How can we claim that "this is our country" alone and that everyone else should go back where they came from?

God also commands justice and care for the widow and the orphan. In ancient times, these two groups had no means of support. "Widows and orphans" came to represent all the marginalized in society, and this command of God leads directly to the social justice teachings of the Catholic Church. Jesus' own example of care for the outcasts of society also calls us to heed God's commands to love all people, especially those in need.

The dual commandment in today's Gospel passage is well-known but still often set aside when loving our neighbor becomes too inconvenient to suit us. Gospel parables like the good Samaritan remind us that our neighbor is not just the family next door. We live now in a global village, and every person is our neighbor. Every person needs our love and care. We can no longer claim that we need to take care of only our own kind. Let the preaching and the prayers this week lift up the high calling we have been given by baptism, prompting our own care for the alien, the widow, the orphan and everyone else who needs us.

All Saints and All Souls': Wednesday is the Feast of All Saints, a holy day of obligation. Thursday is All Souls' Day, not an obligation day but still a good day to encourage people to gather and pray for those who have gone before us. What Mass schedule would allow the largest number of people to celebrate both days? Remember that there are multiple choices for readings (Lectionary #668) on All Souls' Day, so let the lectors and musicians know which ones will be used.

Prayers: 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

by: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Throughout Judeo-Christian history, people have explored how to live as God's people. Reflecting on our bottom line as committed Christians could not be more relevant in our current political and economic climate. Today's readings reiterate that faithful living means — at rock bottom — loving and caring for one another, especially the most vulnerable. The instructions could not be simpler. That we still need to hear this reminds us that simple does not mean easy.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were asked what is the greatest commandment of all: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you told us to love God and to love our neighbor: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you showed us how to live out these two commandments: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, let us pray now for our neighbors here and across the world, whom we are commanded to love.

Minister For the church and all Christians: That we may be faithful to the great commandments ... we pray,

- For the grace to love those who stand in the way of peace ... we pray,
- For the aliens and widowed, the orphaned and poor of today's world who need our care and support ... we pray,
- For the courage to advocate and promote political decisions that reflect our call to serve others ... we pray,
- For international and national, private and public institutions that serve the world's most needy people ... we pray,
- For the patience to love those who are most unlovable ... we pray,
- For those in this community who most need our love; and for a renewed commitment to our parish ministries ... we pray,

Presider God of justice, you have spoken clearly regarding our responsibility to love not only you, but also our neighbors. You have called us especially to love and serve

those who are most vulnerable. Help us to love as Jesus loved. We pray in his name. Amen.

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