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When I ministered in Peru, I had the privilege of knowing a model disciple named Luzmila. She was a prayer leader, catechist, organizer, goad and the self-appointed development director in charge of collecting funds (a nickel at a time) to build a dignified chapel in our little town. One day when I was about to visit the U.S., I asked her what I should tell people about the needs in our desert village with no electricity or running water. She told me, “Meri, when you are with your people, tell them to pray for us.” She then looked at the kids playing in the tiny plaza and said, “Some of those children may be martyrs. Tell your people to pray that we have the strength to remain true to Jesus and his poor.” (Those were the days of terrorism.)

Taken aback because I had been so certain that she would commission me to find donations for her dream chapel, I promised that I would ask my people for prayers. She then smiled and her eyes danced as she said, “And, Merita, you know, if they really pray for us, they will want to be generous!” Gospel woman that she was, Luzmila spontaneously lived the gist of the message of today’s readings.

Today’s Gospel tells the unusual story of a nice encounter between Jesus and a scribe. Whether or not the man started out as a sincere questioner, he and Jesus hit it off as they exchanged theological opinions. The man’s question was one of the favorite debate topics of the day. Related to, but deeper than the wealthy man’s question about how to inherit eternal life, the scribe wanted a rule of thumb, a guiding principle that could be used to discern how to act according to God’s will without recourse to the hundreds of regulations that had been attached to the commandments.

Jesus replied by quoting their tradition. He cited Deuteronomy 6:4-5 that proclaims the essence of the Jewish tradition in a formula in which each word contains a world of meaning: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

This one command tells Israel, whose name implies they are the people who have struggled with God, that their first responsibility is to hear. They are not called to offer sacrifice, build temples or recite the psalter, but only to listen to what God will say. Then, they are told that only God is God. No matter how greatly they esteem their intelligence, they cannot comprehend God. No matter what shiny objects, what idols or philosophies, positions of power or desire for wealth may attract them, there is but one God. That means that there is but one genuine purpose to their lives and they cannot afford to consecrate themselves to anything less than their one God. Additionally, unlike the gods of their neighbors and the faux-divine Roman emperor, the Lord their God desires nothing other than their love in return for the love God never stops offering them. For a people who aspired to be important, this is an immense, humbling comedown. The great people of God, the city on the hill to which the nations will turn for wisdom, need only to love God and to remember that they are not divine.

The command to hear, if not all of its implications, was clear to all religious Jews of Jesus’ day. They recited it morning and night and kept it before them as a key to their identity. But, Jesus wasn’t content to leave it at that. The scribe had

asked for a guide to discernment, so Jesus added a citation from Leviticus to explain how people could show their love of God. Jesus explained that the second commandment fleshes out the first: Love your neighbor as yourself. (Of course, he would broaden the concept of neighbor to include everyone — not just the aliens whom the law told Israelites to protect, but even their enemies.)

Finally, when the scribe approved of his answer, Jesus replied that he was “not far” from the kingdom of God. All that remained was for the scribe to put his ideas into practice. The first commandment teaches that it is not enough to know about God, as if philosophy and theology could substitute for a personal relationship with the God who loves us. The second commandment reminds us that love of God isn’t just a beautiful, mystical feeling. If it is true, it has consequences that make a real difference in the lives of others.

Luzmila summed it up quite nicely. If we really love God and pray, we will be lured into active, generous love for anyone who needs us.

DEUTERONOMY 6:2-6

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 might be the most important passage of the Hebrew Scriptures. Verse 4, translated for us as “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!” may be interpreted and translated in various ways. It can be taken as a profession of faith: “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!” In that case, it calls us to worship God and God alone, forsaking whatever idols our time and culture propose as substitutes. Another way of translating the statement would be to say “The Lord our God is one Lord.” Here, the emphasis is on recognizing that, while God may be worshipped in different sanctuaries, and although there may be different theologies emphasizing different dimensions of who God is, there is but one God, unlimited by shrines, denominations or dogmas.

We should note that these verses begin with a solemn and urgent, “Hear, O Israel!” That is a call to attention, a command reminiscent of Psalm 40:7 which, translated literally, says “You drilled ears for me.” The psalm presents the idea that our ear is a God-made opening to our whole being, to our heart. Therefore, what goes in our ear rouses our will and motivates our obedience.

The “Shema” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), restates the first commandments in positive language, indicating that every “thou shalt not,” is only the beginning — whether it refers to our relationship with God or God’s creatures. This command, depicted as a mandate to listen with one’s whole being, goes on to say that the only thing necessary is to love the one God. This overrides the idea of “fear of the Lord,” even when that simply means awe. It goes beyond obedience, especially in the sense that obedience can simply be submissive or even resentful compliance.

Ultimately, Israel is to hear the call to participate in a mutual relationship of love with the one true God. Responding to that call, each individual and the people as a whole will find the fulfillment of their human vocation. Just as God is described as the only, the One, the people of Israel are called to live in integrity as just exactly who they are and can become. As God’s people, everything about them, their whole heart and soul, all their strength, has been given them for one purpose — to know their God and to live the way their knowledge of God leads them to live.

It becomes clear that verses 2-3 of our reading are simply an anticipation of what will happen as the people grow in knowledge and love of God. Keeping the commands will flow from their loving relationship with God. That, in turn, will be its own reward as they live a fulfilling life, prospering in their humanity and at peace with who they are, no matter what happens around them.

PSALMS 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

The most oft-repeated word in today’s psalm is “my.” But unlike the exclamation of a two-year-old and those who never got beyond that stage, the word expresses gratitude, not possessiveness. Singing this psalm keeps us aware of how many ways God cares for us.

To those who are loathe to hear God spoken of in non-masculine terms, the psalm is a reminder that the tradition has always depicted God not only as masculine and feminine, but also through neuter or inanimate images such as those we have today: a rock, a fortress, shield, horn of salvation and stronghold. These and other diverse images we find throughout Scripture (hen, eagle, mother bear, warrior, nursing mother, etc.) remind us that while many images say

something true about God, no image should ever be taken as exclusive or complete. In fact, clinging to a single image of God would be tantamount to both idolatry and intellectual pride.

As a response to the first reading, Psalm 18 underlines the mutuality of the relationship between God and individuals and with the people as a whole. This psalm describes an ascending spiral of love. As we sing our love for God who does great things for us, we attune ourselves to recognize ever more deeply how God's love strengthens us to be as truly ourselves as God is God.

HEBREWS 7:23-28

This selection from Hebrews concerns itself with assuring the reader that Jesus' priesthood and offering were of an entirely different order from the traditional ministry of the Levitical priests. In some ways, the argument may seem to have little to do with people of the 21st century. The author reminds the readers that because the priests were mortal, a new high priest had to be appointed in each generation. Not only that, but the priests who offered sacrifice were also frail, as Pope Francis says of himself and all the rest of us. Thus, their sacrifices on behalf of the people were probably helpful, but hardly decisive.

The risen Christ shares neither of those characteristics. The author points out that Jesus is holy, innocent and undefiled. Peter T. O'Brien, author of *The Letter to the Hebrews*, explains that a person may be called holy because of his or her way of life; it does not refer to their status or ritual purity. To be blameless means that, like Job, a person is free from guile, a person of integrity, unswayed by evil. That seems to be close to the third concept, undefiled. That can refer to ritual purity, but also to the moral quality without which ritual purity is meaningless. Taken together, these descriptions set Christ off, not as unhuman, but as the best that humanity can achieve.

Finally, the author explains that Jesus was appointed by God as the son. This, like his resurrected life, adds the dimension that no human priesthood can equal. Jesus' priesthood as the son appointed by God sets him apart from the priests whose office was inherited. God chose Jesus, not to speak on behalf of humanity, but to speak to humanity on God's behalf. His priesthood and his intercession, even his sacrifice, go in the opposite direction from what we think of as priestly intercession. God is appealing through him to humanity, not vice versa. Thus, Christ's priesthood and sacrifice are valid forever and effective for anyone who is willing to accept what he offers in the name of God.

Christ, the new priest, is fundamentally different from any other priests because he is sent by God, on behalf of God, to frail, mortal humanity. Understanding the message in this way, we can see that it remains as applicable today as in the first century. Now, it is up to us to contemplate the implications of Christ's new model of priesthood. The first of these must be that our share in Christ's priesthood implies that we, too, are called to be messengers of God's ongoing self-offering of love and grace.

MARK 12:28-34

The story of the scribe who came to Jesus is one of the most inconclusive incidents of Mark's Gospel. It's almost as if Mark set us up for confusion. As soon as we hear that a scribe came to ask Jesus a question, we are ready for a clash of intellects and religious outlooks. In language that sounds very much like the tests others put to Jesus, this man asks Jesus' opinion about which of God's commands is the most important. Surely, this is a trap!

The scribe's question was a topic of popular debate. It is said that in those days a questioner challenged Hillel and Shammai, the two great rabbis of the early first century, to teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one leg. Hillel replied, "Do not do to your neighbor what is hateful to you; this is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary." (See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark, A Commentary on the Greek Text*.)

Jesus did not quote Hillel, but went to Scripture. He quoted Deuteronomy 6:4-5, a prayer/teaching that serves as something like a hinge between the commandments and all the regulations intended to flesh them out. It is also the oldest prayer formula in the scriptural tradition. As such, Jews were supposed to recite it every morning and evening. Deuteronomy 6:7-9 tells people to teach it to their children, to bind the prayer as a symbol on their hand and forehead, and to inscribe it on their doorposts. This prayer/creed would be etched deep in every faithful person's consciousness and have a subconscious effect stronger than any 21st century advertising. It is no wonder that Jesus could respond so quickly and unequivocally to the scribe's question.

But then, Jesus added another citation, revising Hillel, he quoted Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Although Mark doesn’t finish the quotation, almost everyone who heard it would have known that the last words of that command were, “I am the Lord.”

In response to the scribe, Jesus combined two of the popular schools of thought of his day, implicitly connecting heaven and earth, love of God and love of neighbor as two inseparable dimensions of a life of faith. The Lord in whom the people believed, who gave them their identity as a people, demanded that they treat one another with the same attitude of love that they were to show the God who gave them life.

In what is a unique situation in the Gospel, the man who had questioned Jesus went on to affirm Jesus’ response and to add a bit of his own commentary. It may have still been a battle of wits as the scribe showed his command of Jesus’ response by adding that “to love your neighbor ... is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Nevertheless, Jesus had the last word when he told the man, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Why only “not far”? The answer might be in Jesus’ assessment of the scribe’s response. Mark tells us that Jesus saw that he answered “with understanding.” The word “understanding” here has to do with the head more than the heart, an exercise of the intellect that need not imply commitment. Judged on the first quote from Deuteronomy, the scribe had mastered the “soul” or mind, but he had yet to demonstrate how his knowledge would issue forth into action.

We don’t know the end of the story. Did the scribe go away content with his doctrinal correctness or did he take the next step? All we know is that if we ask Christ what we should do, the answer will call forth our whole heart and soul and strength. That is probably why Mark concluded by saying, “And no one dared to ask him any more questions.”

Planning: 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

As we near the end of the liturgical year, the readings point our thoughts toward ultimate things. In the northern hemisphere, nature itself prompts us to reflect on the end of life and questions about the afterlife. This can be a healthy corrective to our usual tendency to focus only on the immediate future and our immediate goals.

The autumn season fits well with this month’s focus on death, which is the reality that relativizes everything else in our lives. Many things that seemed so important fade into insignificance as death approaches.

Today’s readings offer the key perspective on life, whether we are young and vital or older and more conscious of the end of life. The first reading, the great “Shema, Israel” from Deuteronomy reminds us that God must be central in our lives and our loves. The Gospel passage repeats that point and adds the reminder that love of neighbor is intimately connected to love of God. The second reading, of course, is continuing its own path through Hebrews, but it also reminds us that Jesus “has a priesthood that does not pass away. Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them.”

All Saints and All Souls last week set the tone for November as a time to remember those who have gone before us and also to face honestly the inevitability of our own deaths. Rather than prompting morbid thoughts, the liturgy invites us to look forward to eternal life in God. For those left behind, of course, death brings grief, but our faith assures us that our separation from loved ones is only temporary if we live and die in the Lord.

In what ways does your parish invite people to remember their deceased relatives and friends? Do you have visual reminders of those who have gone before us, like a book of remembrance inscribed with the names of those who have died in the past year? Do you offer special petitions at Masses in November for all the departed? Do you provide services outside of Mass, perhaps in the context of vespers, for people to gather and pray for deceased relatives and friends? Would it be helpful to offer a simple reception after such an evening prayer service to allow people to mingle and share their losses and their hopes?

Our concern for the deceased should be matched by our concern for the living. The liturgy reflects the dual commandment in today's Gospel. It is not enough for us to worship God if we do not embrace our neighbors. Reverence and hospitality in the assembly are not in conflict; both are essential for true Christian worship.

Prayers: 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Peg Eherdt

Introduction

The readings this Sunday call us to listen to the word of God that makes clear the new law of love. Rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and confirmed in these readings, the commandment that matters most is to love God and to love one another. There is no need for ritual sacrifice but instead we are called to carefully make God's love the center of our lives.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were sent to show us how to love, Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are the strength to whom we turn, Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you are our eternal priest and source of all love, Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for the needs of this gathered community and for our world.

Minister For the church, for all of us, for the will and desire to love God with all our hearts and strength, to live that love in generosity to our neighbor, we pray,

- For the U.S. and her leaders on this mid-term election eve; for all U.S. citizens that they may vote mindful of their responsibility to care for their neighbor and to promote the common good, we pray,
- For those who live each day with doubt and insecurity, for those who are consumed with self-absorption and conceit, for those who struggle to see themselves as the beloved of God, for the grace among us all to love others as we love ourselves, we pray,
- For all our beloved sick, for those facing addiction or depression each day, for those living with dementia or mental illness and for all families who love them, we pray,
- With gratitude for the communion of saints who surround us, we remember all who have died in our parish community and those who have died among our own families and friends, for all those who have gone home to God, we pray,

Presider Loving God, give us openness to your grace so that we may truly hear and listen to your word. When we are tempted to turn away from your love, bring us back to your promise that love is the only command you have given and the reason for which we are made. Make of us your faithful servants and fill our hearts with your strength. We ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen

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