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“O my people, I will put my spirit in you that you may live” (Ezekiel 37:14).

Ezek 37:1-14; Matt 22:34-40

I suspect that not many daily homilies this past week have been preached on the first readings from the prophet Ezekiel. On Monday, the sudden death of his wife was the basis for his prophecy of the coming anguish and exile of Israel. On Tuesday, he attacked the haughty king of Tyre and prophesied his downfall. On Wednesday he excoriated the shepherds of Israel for abusing the flock. By Thursday, we began to see some light with Ezekiel's poetic promise that God would replace hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. Today's first reading is the memorable scene from the exile when he is told to call forth new life from a field strewn with dry bones.

In today's Gospel, Jesus echoes that same powerful theme when tested by the Pharisees about the most important commandment of the Law. He goes to the heart of the Torah, which they had surrounded with a thicket of 619 lesser rules extrapolated from the Decalogue. This multiplication had led to a fussy legalism that was robbing the Covenant of its spirit and purpose. Only love will revive the dry bones of the Law. Jesus reminds his critics that the greatest commandment, the commandment to love recited daily as the prayer known as the *Sh'ma* ("Hear, O Israel"), contained the entire Law. Their effort to accuse Jesus of not knowing the Law or undermining it with radical ideas failed.

Jesus affirms that authentic renewal begins with recovering fundamental principles. He reminded these proud scholars and models of piety that only love can inspire life. The letter of the law can kill, while the spirit of love puts human flesh on the bones that give structure to our lives. Love is the greatest commandment because it breathes life into everything.

It is not surprising that our political campaigns are rhetorically about renewing and restoring the nation to its founding principles. Whether voters want to "Make America Great Again" or "Build Back Better," they are expressing the desire to find life, to recover a vision of what the country was set on course to be, however imperfectly, when it was founded. We come home to our best selves again by renewing the promises made when we began.

The coming two months of political wrangling may seem more like the Ezekiel of disaster than the Ezekiel of hope, but his ultimate message is that crisis can lead to renewal and even dry bones can spring to life again by the power of the Spirit. Jesus reminds us that no society can survive or flourish without love of God and neighbor.

as its motivating principle.

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