Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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"Which is the first of all the commandments?" (Mark 12:28).

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deut 6:2-6; Ps 18; Heb 7:23-28; Mark 12:28b-34

Early church theologian Tertullian reported what was being said about Christians, “See how they love one another.” This visible expression of mutual love, even during times of adversity, not only fulfilled the Gospel but was also a source of

evangelization. People were drawn to communities alive with God’s love expressed in service.

In today’s Gospel, a lawyer asked Jesus what the greatest of all the commandments was. Jesus recited the *Sh'ma*, the prayer Jews say each day: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” *Sh'ma*, the Hebrew word that begins the prayer means, "Listen."

This prayer was so central to Jewish faith, it was inscribed on scrolls placed in a small box posted near the door of the house, and even worn on the foreheads and arms of devout Jews. The lawyer, who may have approached Jesus in hopes of criticizing him as a hill country preacher from suspect Galilees, is so moved to hear the words of the *Sh’ma,* he responds to Jesus by repeating the entire prayer. What begins as a trap becomes a dueling recitation of the heart of the Law.

A rabbi who gave a talk at our parish on prayer said that Christians seem to pray by telling God what they need and want. Jewish prayer, he said, begins with the word “Listen.” We first listen to God, and this puts order into our relationships with everyone and everything: God, creation, ourselves and our neighbors. St. Benedict, founder of Western monasticism, knew this and also began his rule with the word, “Listen.”

All of Jesus’ teachings, and even his debates with his critics over laws and rituals, came down to love, the one thing necessary to faith in God and service to others. We can say that life today, for all its quarrels and divisions in both the church and society, ultimately comes down to the challenges of love. How much progress could we make in our society and politics if everyone started by listening instead of unloading speeches on others to correct their views. Love begins by listening.

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