

Listen! Love!

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Illustration by Mark Bartholomew | Nov. 3, 2012 | Spiritual Reflections

In today's liturgy, the Testaments meet. Both affirm that loving God and loving one another are the essential challenges that identify believers and authenticate their faith. However, this love is not about feelings. On the contrary, love is a deliberate decision to serve another regardless of our emotions. Love, as Ralph Kuehner and Joseph Juknialis have noted, is about making decisions based upon the vision of Jesus, despite the allure of those many other visions that may be clamoring for our attention and allegiance (*Living the Word*, World Library Pub., 2005).



In today's first reading, the Deuteronomic author enunciates the call that was extended to every Israelite: to love God fully and freely. Why couldn't we love the One who is love? But, in order to make that love real and to move it beyond mere words, the ancient Israelites were asked to keep all the commandments that God gave them. Their faithful observance of the law affirmed the integrity of their love. By the same token, their breaches of the law, and their legal maneuvering to reinterpret what proved difficult or undesirable, were regarded as a lack of fidelity to the God who called forth their love. Walter Brueggemann would have us be mindful that the call to love begins with a call to hear or to listen: "Hear, O Israel!" Listening is a peculiar discipline, says Brueggemann (*Reverberations of Faith*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). To listen is to open yourself, to surrender autonomy and self-sufficiency to the commanding authority of another. To sharpen their attentiveness to God, the Jewish people, through the centuries, have repeated the words from Deuteronomy at least twice daily. A friend who is a rabbi suggests that these words, often referred to as the *Shema Israel*, are more than a prayer; they are like a pledge of allegiance to God. Repeating this pledge renews one's commitment and forges solidarity between God and the community of believers.

In today's Gospel, Jesus will agree that the challenge set forth by the Deuteronomic author was indeed the believer's first obligation: loving God with one's whole self, heart, soul, mind and strength. Jesus, who came to fulfill the law, paired the love of God with the love of neighbor. Although the laws are numbered "first" and "second," they are, in truth, only one. Love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated; rather, they are mutually complementary and interdependent. Later, the Johannine epistolary writer would affirm the relatedness of these two laws. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the command we have from Jesus: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20-21).

This is the choice set before each believer present today. Do we love God and neighbor, or do we show ourselves to be liars? John did not mince words. Neither did Jesus. Nor is there any loophole that will allow us to negate or diminish this challenge. Lover or liar, which will we be?

When faced with this choice, Mother Teresa suggested that our love for others will evolve more readily when we try to discover in them the image of God and the face of Jesus (*The Joy in Loving*, Penguin Books, 1996). Even in his most "distressing disguises, Jesus is present, and that presence teaches us how to love." To make her point, Mother Teresa shared an experience she had on a trip to Venezuela. A wealthy family had given her community land on which to build a children's home. When Mother Teresa went to thank them, she met their children, as well; the eldest was seriously disabled. "What is his name?" she asked the mother. "His name," said the mother, "is 'Professor of Love' because this child is teaching us the whole time how to express love in action." There was a beautiful smile on the mother's face. Mother Teresa reflected on this: " 'Professor of Love,' they called their child, so terribly disabled, so disfigured."

As we go through life as Jesus' disciples, we will meet many such "professors." If we are willing, they can teach us how to love.

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