

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 8, 2012 at 12:22pm

We must always remember God's most important commandments

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

As we try to listen deeply to God's word today in the Gospel and reflect on what we have heard, it will be helpful to put today's Gospel lesson in the context of the last few Sundays, the Gospel that we've been reading from Mark over this year. You may remember over the last several weeks, the Gospel tells us Jesus has been on his final journey to Jerusalem, where he told the disciples three separate times, "When we get there, the Son of Man will be handed over to his enemies, tortured, mocked, ridiculed and nailed to a cross, executed in the most ignominious way possible."

Last Sunday, as Jesus was about to enter the city of Jericho, which would be just before entering Jerusalem, we had that incident of Bartimaeus, the blind man who cried out to Jesus. "Son of David, have pity on me." We listened and watched as Jesus called to the man, Bartimaeus, and gently asked, "What do you want?" Bartimaeus said, "I want to see." Jesus told him, "Your faith has saved you and made you whole." That is a very dramatic example of the way that Jesus continued always to reach out to those who were poor and suffering.

After that in the Gospel -- we skip over the part, but what happened on Palm Sunday was Jesus entered into Jerusalem. Now it's the last week of his life, and during this time, he's had confrontations with the religious leaders. He overthrew the tables in the temple where they were making the house of God a den of thieves. There were different times with the Herodian groups, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Scribes.

They have been challenging Jesus during this week. It's after that that we have this quite extraordinary incident of the one Scribe who isn't trying to challenge Jesus, but asks a very sincere question. He's really been listening to Jesus and wants to hear what Jesus says. "Of the commandments, which is the greatest?" "The first of all the commandments." Jesus goes through what we now use as our first lesson, the Book of

Deuteronomy, and recites a passage that every practicing Jew would make part of his daily prayer.

"Hear, O Israel, God, our God is one God and you shall love God, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." Then Jesus adds from another part of the Hebrew scriptures, the Book of Leviticus, a second commandment. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these two," Jesus says. Then, the Scribe affirms what Jesus says. Obviously, he'd been listening to Jesus because he speaks about how the love of God and love of neighbor is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

That's something that Jesus has been teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, in the part where Jesus said, "You've heard it said of old, 'Love your neighbor, hate your enemy?' You've heard it was said, 'Thou shalt not kill?' I say to you, you must not even have anger in your heart against a brother or sister." To press the point home, Jesus says, "Even if you're taking your gift to the altar, you're going to worship God, and there you remember your brother or sister has something against you, go first and be reconciled with your brother or sister. Then come back and offer your gift."

Jesus is making the point so strongly that nothing is more important than reconciliation and love for your brother or sister, not even sacrifice, burnt offerings and worship of God. In another part of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus quotes from the Book of the Prophet Hosea, who at one point in instructing the chosen people tells them in chapter six, "Oh, Ephraim, what shall I do with you? Oh, Judah, how shall I deal with you?"

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"This love of yours is like morning mist, like morning dew that quickly disappears. This is why I smote you through the prophets and inflame you by the words of my mouth." And here are the key words: "For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice. It is knowledge of God, not burnt offerings." Jesus has been preaching that, and obviously the Scribe has been listening. So he affirms what Jesus says and declares the love of God and love of neighbor is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

He is not far from the Reign of God because he has been listening to Jesus. As we listen to this Gospel, then, perhaps it's important for us to ask ourselves, "How close are we to this Scribe in regard to these two commandments, love of God and love of our neighbor?" Would we really say they're more important than even worship? Perhaps we need to ask ourselves, "How do we love God?" That isn't always easy.

I think that incident from last Sunday, the healing of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, shows us how we can really begin to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and all our strength because Bartimaeus, in that coming to Jesus, who as we know is the visible image of the invisible God, and experiences that overwhelming love that Jesus has for him. He is so gentle in healing him and so respectful. He asks him, "What do you want?"

"I want to see." "Your faith, your reaching out to God has saved you." What does Bartimaeus do? Because he has now very deeply experienced God's love overwhelming him, making him whole, he leaves everything and he follows Jesus who is God. I think that's how we come to love God, when we begin to go into ourselves and begin to realize how much God has done for us, not by way of extraordinary miracles, but simply the way that God has loved us into being.

We experience the love of God when we begin to understand that we would not exist if God did not love us and sustain us every instant of our existence. When we begin to have a deep sense that our very being

depends upon God's love, there is no way we can respond except to try to return that love in gratitude with joy, in thanksgiving love God because God has first loved us. Then how about loving our neighbor? This is the second.

"You must love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater love than these two commandments." Later this afternoon, we'll be reflecting on what happened at the Vatican Council, for which we celebrate the 50th anniversary this year. The document that we will be discussing this afternoon is a document that makes very clear how disciples of Jesus, those who really listen to Jesus, will love their neighbor as themselves.

The very first sentence of the document, "On the Church in the Modern World," says, "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of people of this age, especially the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of those who are poor or in any way afflicted or oppressed these, too, are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ, the disciples of Jesus." In that very first sentence, what that document is telling us is that those who follow Jesus reach out to all other people, but especially the poor, the afflicted, the oppressed, and become so one with them that we share their griefs, their anxieties, their joys and their hopes.

We reach out to them in a way that we draw them to ourselves. We become one, but that has to be done in very concrete ways. To love our neighbor, to be one with those who are afflicted and oppressed, those who really have grief and anxiety because of their situation -- this becomes so important as we vote because we have a situation in our country that needs to be changed dramatically. We now have the highest number of poor people in the United States that we've had in 51 years.

43.6 million people in our country live in poverty. One in five children in the United States is poor. One in 10 senior citizens is poor. There are 49 million people in the United States who live in households which eat only because they receive food stamps, visit food pantries or soup kitchens for help. Sixteen million people are so poor that they skip meals or have foregone food at some point in the last year.

This is the highest level of poverty in the United States since statistics have been kept. The sad thing is that the gap between the rich and the poor keeps getting wider. From 1979 to 2006, the richest 1 percent of the people in our country more than doubled their share of the total U.S. income, from 10 percent to 23 percent. For the last 25 years, over 90 percent of the total growth in income in the United States went to the top 10 percent earners, leaving 9 percent of all income to be shared by the bottom 90 percent.

There is something wrong in our country. It's the richest country in the world, and yet more and more people are becoming poor. The gap between the rich and the poor is getting greater and greater. Certainly it's important for us as we vote this week to think through very clearly the policies of both candidates, both parties, of the candidates for the president, vice president, Senate and Congress. In both of those parties, which policies will really indicate love for our neighbor, to love our neighbor as ourselves?

I would not give an answer, but I suggest that each of us very conscientiously must vote with this awareness in mind and try to make sure that our vote will be a vote whereby we show that we do love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and all our strength, but that we also love our neighbor as ourselves. Perhaps it would be important for us to remember something that John, a New Testament writer in the First Letter of John, says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates a brother or sister, you are a liar, for whoever does not love a brother or sister whom you have seen, cannot love God whom you have not seen."

This is the commandment we have from Jesus. Whoever loves God must love their brother and sister. There is no greater commandment than these two, and they are worth more than all burnt offerings or any

burnt sacrifice. Perhaps as we reflect on this and try to follow these commandments, Jesus will say to us deep in our hearts, "You are not far from the Reign of God."

[Homily given at St. Joseph the Worker, Los Angeles. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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