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Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The Peace Pulpit

Every week as we try to listen deeply to God's Word it's important to put the passage that we listen to on a particular Sunday into the larger context of the gospel and that's especially important today if we're really going to respond in an adequate way to what Jesus is teaching us. As I reminded you before we began the gospel, this has been a continuous reading of Mark's Gospel, and we've traveled with Jesus on this last journey to Jerusalem. Along the way he kept teaching us how to be a disciple.

Now it's the last week of his life. He's in Jerusalem, staying within the temple precinct, and he's a very controversial person. In fact, as he entered Jerusalem, he challenged the civil authorities especially the Roman authority, especially King Herod, because he came into Jerusalem in a way that the people began to acclaim him as a king. They were threatened that yes, he might, with that great following of his, overthrow their power. Though when Jesus did enter Jerusalem, he was practically mocking what it meant in their eyes to be a king -- where you would have an army, where you would have all kinds of power and might. He came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. We all remember that very well. Very simple. Unarmed. Very humble. Not the way that we think of kings and people in power.

I guess Jesus really would like to overthrow those kings and those rulers by turning upside-down what they believe in and rejecting all the power, the wealth, the prestige and so on. But still they didn't understand that -- so they were challenged and they were angry. But what made Jesus so controversial was, here in the temple -- we always remember this incident from the gospel because it's so vivid and it's in all four gospels -- he goes in there and he turns over the tables of the buyers and the sellers and he drives them out; he says, "You are making the house of God a den of thieves. You're robbing the poor.

Get out of here." Obviously the people running that temple business were not very pleased with that.

So Jesus comes into Jerusalem, and he knows he's heading toward being tortured and being executed, but he still speaks out boldly, clearly and in a way that threatens the earthly powers. So when you hear today's lesson, it's kind of like a break for Jesus. Here's a scribe, a teacher of the law, who isn't upset with Jesus. So often they would come to him and ask him a question, but it was always to trap him, to get him to say something that then they could use against him. Here was someone who was interested. He's really discussing with Jesus how to listen to this Law of God and follow it. For the people of that time, it was very complicated actually. There were 613 very specific laws. If you tended to be a person who was slightly obsessive, you would go crazy, I think, because you had to try to remember every day, "Did I observe this, this, this?" and so on. And so a scribe like the one talking to Jesus saying there must be some way we can get the profound meaning of the Law and yet not be tied up in the kinds of practices that would make us nervous if we didn't obey them. And so he asks Jesus, "Well, how do you take these 613 individual precepts and boil them down so you get something that is very profound and yet can be followed?"

So Jesus then responds to the man, the scribe, with the words from the Book of Deuteronomy, "Listen, O Israel! Love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, mind, soul, all your strength." That's the first commandment, but then there's a second that needed to go with it. "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbor as you would want to be loved. Those two sum up everything."

I have a sense that Jesus enjoyed this back and forth discussion with that scribe because he was finding someone who really was trying to get his message, who wanted to live it, and I hope that's the spirit with which we come today to hear the Word of God and we want to understand the message of Jesus in the most profound way possible but in a way that we can live it out. And so we listen then to Jesus telling us, in a sense, "Here's what all your religious practice comes down to -- love God."

But you know that might not be as easy as it sounds. Love God. God's a spirit. God's infinite. God's beyond us in every way. How can we love God?

The first thing, I think, is to understand that God first loved us. God loves us into being. We wouldn't be here except for God's love. When we begin to realize that, what's our response? Well obviously it's going to be gratitude and joy. God loves me! This God who is infinite, who is outside of all creation. God loves me, called me into being, out of love. So we respond with thanks, with praise for God. That's how we begin to fulfill this first commandment.

But there's another aspect of that that I think is very important also. You know when you talk about love, if it is really genuine love, it can't be one person over another, one person in power over another. It has to be totally mutual to love, doesn't it? If we have a love relationship with another person then it's going to be mutual and equal. Well, how can that be with God? It couldn't be except that God becomes present in our world in Jesus who is our brother, who is like us in every way except sin. And so now, we can love God, truly love God in Jesus and it can be mutual as any human love is.

That's extraordinary! Probably we don't think about that very often. But that's the great blessing, the gift

of God coming into this world, being one of us in every way but sin. Now we can truly love God in mutuality, in equality, back and forth.

If I'm able then to love God, the most important thing is what those words in the Book of Deuteronomy start off with and what Jesus repeats. "Listen. Listen, O Israel. Listen, God's People." That's what God is saying to us. Listen. If we love God, we will be listening with the deepest part of our being, to whatever God is telling us in the scriptures, in our contact with one another. God is speaking to us always if only we would listen. We love God when we listen deeply and respond.

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But then there's that second commandment, and the two go together. Do you remember the Letter of John? "Anyone who says you love God but do not love your neighbor, you are a liar. Because if you can't love the one you see, how are you going to love the one you don't see?" So these two things have to go together. Love your neighbor -- the one you can see -- as yourself, as you would want to be loved.

And there are so many ways we could speak about that, but I suggest that maybe one of the ways we could learn how to really love our neighbor is to remember how Jesus loved his people. There are so many different incidents in the scriptures. Think of last Sunday's gospel -- the blind man that everybody else was rejecting, pushing away. He doesn't have time for you. You're a poor beggar, a street person, dirty, filthy, whatever. And they're trying to keep him quiet. That's the very person Jesus reaches out to. He stops everything and says, "Come to me." And the man comes, and Jesus treats him with love, kindness and compassion.

But there are so many of those incidents in the Scriptures. Maybe you have one that's a favorite of yours. Think about it often, how Jesus reaches out to heal, to console, to comfort. To rejoice, to celebrate.

I was looking at the stained glass window in the back there before Mass and it shows Jesus at the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. He's going there to have a good time, to love them and to be loved by them. This is Jesus. Jesus teaches us how to love. So think of some passage that is especially significant for you that shows Jesus loving and then try to be like that.

When this scribe entered into this conversation with Jesus, it was a very sincere question, which is so different from those who were trying so often to trap him. And Jesus exchanged back and forth with the man, and he really caught on. I hope we catch on today. He said, "Yes, you're right," after Jesus had proclaimed how you sum up all the commandments. "You're right," he says to Jesus, "And that's more important than burnt offerings, than all the sacrifices." They knew nothing unless you love God with your whole heart, mind and soul and all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

Remember when Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Even if you're coming to the altar to offer your gifts and there you remember your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gifts. It's not important to come to worship when someone is at odds with you. Go and be reconciled. Love. Be loved." That's what counts.

We have to learn that.

Jesus says to that scribe, "Yes, you've understood. You are very close to entering into the Reign of God." That doesn't mean heaven. That means letting God be in your life right now, experiencing God every moment of every day. And that's what can happen to us -- become very close to being in the Reign of God where we experience God present to us when we learn how to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and all our strength and love our neighbor as our self.

I invite you - enter into this Reign of God by living out these two commandments that sum up all the law and the prophets.

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