

Homily Year 30 - A - October 25, 2020

One day, Charlie Brown, the cartoon character, is trying to write a letter to a girl. Snoopy watches sympathetically. Charlie says: "I just don't know how to write a love letter. What can you say to a girl that shows you really like her?" In the next frame, Snoopy thinks: "Enclosed please find a cookie." Would that it were that simple to show love for one another.

Jesus' opponents just won't give up! Last week, they attempted to trip him up on the sticky question of taxes to Caesar. Today's passage is a cunning attempt to lead him into a hair-splitting debate over the details of the Mosaic Law! It is noteworthy that Matthew uses the same Greek word here – to test – as when describing Jesus' earlier confrontation with Satan in the desert. Clearly, he wants us to understand that those who test Jesus are in league with, or at least unwittingly doing, the work of Satan.

Matthew sets the scene well! A Pharisee — a lawyer – asks Jesus which of the commandments is the greatest. His response does not seek to set aside the Law, but instead to interpret it more fully. For Jesus, the greatest commandment is found in Deuteronomy: You shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength (6:5).

Jesus' answer emphasizes the centrality of love — a cord that binds together the human heart and soul and directs us toward God. While asked for only one commandment, Jesus adds a second, quoting from Leviticus, which he says is equal to and inseparable from the first: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (19:18). Everything, he says, hangs on these two interrelated commandments. Like a door on two hinges that will not open or close properly if out of alignment, so, too, our lives if we do not love God and our neighbor. Jesus is not discounting any other commandments, but simply emphasizing that these two are foundational.

So what does this declaration mean for us today? As we struggle to live the Christian life, we can so easily compartmentalize love of God and love of neighbor. Sometimes, it may seem easier to love God than to love our neighbor. But, as Jesus proclaims, these two loves cannot be separated. Sometimes we choose love of something else rather than love of God or love of neighbor.

By linking this Gospel with a practical reading from Exodus, we are reminded that this love is more than a warm and fuzzy feeling, more than giving someone a few cookies as Snoopy advises.

Loving God means prayer and worshipping God; loving neighbor results in our outreach to others. Both are tied together. Worship without love of neighbor or outreach to one's neighbor without worship of God break the equation.

A very hard reality is this. The more we focus on ourselves and our own needs, the less we will love God and love others. The more time we spend on taking care of what we want, the less time will be spent on what God wants. The more we serve ourselves, the less we will serve God and others. How many ways can I express that reality?

The words of Jesus sound so very true and very beautiful. Transferring those words into concrete, practical reality will challenge us. Some are up for the challenge; some make excuses for not facing the challenge; others don't bother; while others realize that they need to buy into the Love God/Love Neighbor behavior.

*Lord,
teach us to love you, as you deserve;
teach us to love others, as you love us; teach us to love, even when
it hurts to love.*

*For it is in loving that we give glory to you.
It is in loving that we give happiness to others. And it is in loving
that we find meaning in our own lives.*