

REFLECTION FOR THE 30TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Exodus 22:20-26 1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10 Matthew 22:34-40

October 25, 2020

When asked which was the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus highlighted two verses in the Jewish Scripture. Both were very well known to everyone. The first is called the *Shema* after the first words of the verse, "*Shema Yisrael.*" It's the foundational creed of Judaism and the centerpiece of every morning and evening prayer. It's the first scripture every Jewish child puts to memory. It's contained in the *mezuzah* that's placed on the doorpost of every Jewish home. I'll quote the entire verse. "*Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). This call to love God is so central that Jewish tradition even presented Israel as the bride of God. "*For he who has become your husband is your maker*" (Isaiah 54:5). The ideal, unconditional love between husband and wife is the definition of one's relationship with God; it's a love relationship.

Jesus added a second scripture verse to the *Shema*. "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (Leviticus 19:18). Why did Jesus add this second verse? Wasn't the verse from Deuteronomy powerful enough to stand on its own? Let's think about it.

Most people, if asked, would say that they love God. If asked if they love God with their whole heart, mind and soul, most people would say, "I try." That's a truthful, realistic answer because our love isn't perfect yet.

Let's think a bit more about this love. In the Christian tradition we confess that God *is* love. If we are to say that we love God with our whole heart, mind and soul we would be in heaven, our humanity purified of anything and everything that might distract our love. We would be one with God. Truthfully, I'm not there, and I don't know of anyone who is. Here's where the second verse comes in.

By uniting love-of-God with love-of-neighbor Jesus gives us the path to heaven. The first letter of John explains the path – but it's not an easy one to travel. "*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*" (1 John 4:20-21). Maybe another way of putting it would be to say, "The extent to which I love my neighbor is the extent to which I love God." Or, "I can't love God more than I love my neighbor." This is a tough teaching.

Today's first reading from the book of Exodus gives examples of loving our neighbor. "*You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan...*" The passage goes on with examples. All of them are challenging.

Right now, in our country and in most of Europe where populism is raising its dragon head, that first command is most apropos. Take note of the violent tribal wars in Africa and the seemingly never-ending Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The ancient wisdom in the book of Exodus needs to be heard today more than ever.

In our country we've been witnessing the uncovering of our national shadow. Many of us are frightened and disturbed by it. Racism and its twin, xenophobia, are the two shadow faces that have emerged. For a long time, we've managed to keep the shadow

in our national unconscious even though it goes against every ideal we stand for as Americans.

For our nation to come to maturity we must admit that the shadow exists and wields tremendous power in our conscious, everyday lives. We don't like hearing about the pain our immigration policies cause. But we're hearing about it. We don't like hearing about race and gender inequality. But movements like *Black Lives Matter* and *Me Too* won't let us forget it.

As we come face to face with our national shadow we're in position to address it nationally and personally. We mustn't allow our fear, guilt and shame to prevent us from creatively confronting our shadow. We're not in a bad place. We're in one of the most creative moments in our history.

As a country we're in the advanced stage of our adolescence. It's time to begin the healing work of lovingly owning our shadow. It's the only way we can tame its power. Mature individuals are aware of the good and bad in them and work to nourish the good and heal the bad.

Jesus showed us the path to personal and national maturity. It's the path of love. He never said it was an easy path. His cross is a constant reminder of that. It's our time to stand up and begin the walk to a new and more mature world. Our national shadow is in plain view. We mustn't be angry or disillusioned about that. We're in the perfect place and the perfect time to move forward. It's the perfect time to step out of our adolescence.

It's never easy to take those first steps. Just take note of the national suffering we're presently experiencing. But it's time. The Spirit has brought us face to face with our shadow. It's the time to heal and grow, to take our first steps toward maturity. The path is so clear and so well lit. *Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind... and your neighbor as yourself.* Hand in hand let's take our first step into the light with these words of scripture to guide us.