

### 30<sup>th</sup> (QA&SJ) Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

In today's gospel the subject of love arises again and the tension between the teachings of Jesus and the Jewish leadership represented by the Pharisees and the Sadducees was getting intense. *Who are these two groups?* They were the two competing authorities of Judaism in Jesus' time. The Sadducees were the traditional ruling class of priests who did not believe in the resurrection, and the Pharisees were the experts or interpreters of the law. One of their members approached Jesus with a question, *which commandment is the greatest?* He's not talking about the traditional 10 but about the Mosaic Law, which scholarly Pharisees had subdivided into 613 commandments (365 negative and 248 positive). Before we get too judgmental about the Pharisees' loads of rules and regulations we might recall our own church's legal system. In the code of Canon Law we have 1,752 laws. Certainly there is nothing wrong with an institution having guidelines, rules and regulations. In fact, it is essential. The problem lies not in the number of laws, but in whether they take priority over the foundation of religion. The Pharisees believed that every part of the law had the same authority. According to them it is vital and essential to observe both the small and the great commandments faithfully. Thus to answer the question: "*Which is the greatest commandment?*" is to suggest that some aspects of the Law might be ignored or neglected or trivialized.

Jesus responds that the greatest commandment is, "*You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind.*" These demand total, unconditional, unlimited love of God, summed up in the Shema, Israel's prayer recited by a pious Jew daily ("*Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*") "*Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.*" The second commandment, also found in the law, is like this, or better yet the same. It commands love of neighbor. These are the sum of all the commandments. They are not in conflict but complement each other. True religion is a matter of the heart. When we are God-centered, it becomes

much easier to love others. Like the two sides of one coin love of God and love of our neighbor are inseparable.

Our love for God does not bring us into an exclusive relationship, rather love diffuses, it goes out and brings others into the circle of love. To profess that we love God while remaining indifferent to the plight of our neighbor is a contradiction. We cannot call ourselves Christian and continue crucifying our neighbor and be indifferent to the needs of those who do not have food to eat and shelter. Love for neighbor requires putting others ahead of oneself. To love others means to seek their true good, serving them out of love for the Lord. We need to come out of ourselves and look beyond the narrow interests of our conceit and self-love. The more we love authentically, the more fulfilled our life will become. *If you start disliking someone everything they do will be irritating to you.* Loving our neighbor as ourselves is wonderful in theory but quite a challenge in practice. *How can I love a noisy and inquisitive neighbor whose children are downright bad-mannered, not to mention a co-worker who is trying on my nerves?* To show love in such circumstances is dreadfully difficult and demands great effort and yet, more often than not, we meet God in such an encounter. Make no mistake our religion becomes an escape and our holiness an illusion if we pray daily, go to church on Sundays, yet cut ourselves off from the people who are worshiping under the same roof as ourselves. A pastor advised his parishioners, *“I would like you better if you were a little less pious and a little more charitable.”* Love of God is false if it is not complimented by the love of the people who we rub elbows with every day on the street where we live or the office we work or the house we share.

As St. John said, *“anyone who says he loves God and hates his brother is a liar.”* Take this little test. *Who is the greatest in your heart? If you have extra time, with whom will you spend it? If you have extra money, to whom will you give it? If you have good news, who will be the first person you’ll share it with?* God does not

want a cold, functional and calculating heart. He wants a grateful heart, responding to his loving, generous heart. *Which commandment of the law is the greatest?* The greatest is Jesus. He summarized the whole law into the *law of love*. He advances morality when he proclaims the love of God as being measured by love of neighbor. He lives out this law and brings it close to our hearts. The commandment to love keeps all other commandments in place and in shape. Mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance are just different names or different angles of love. The commandment to love demands commitment and conviction from us so that others will begin to love just as we choose to love. Otherwise we will be living isolated and lonely lives. St. Paul summed them all up by saying: *“Over all these virtues put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect.”* Thus by fulfilling these two great commandments we hope to become models of faith and as St. Paul from our second reading urges us, *“Be imitators of the Lord who gave himself totally for our sakes.”* Amen!