

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday per Annum  
Exodus 22:20-26;  
I Thessalonians 1:5c-10;  
Matthew 22:34-40  
Little Flower - 10/29/17

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment of the law, Jesus responded with the two great commandments: "*You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,*" and "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

A common misunderstanding of these commandments is that these commandments were new with Jesus. However, both of them come from the Old Testament. The first great commandment comes from the Book of Deuteronomy [6:5]. The second comes from the Book of Leviticus [19:8]. What is new is that Jesus linked love of God and love of neighbor inseparably. There can be no true love of God without love of neighbor, and there can be no true love of neighbor without love of God.

When Jesus died on the cross, he joined love of God and love of neighbor perfectly in one act. He offered his life to God for us. Likewise, Mary's *yes* to the angel also joined love for God and love for neighbor in one act. By saying *yes* to the angel, she demonstrated love for God by accepting God's will for her and demonstrated love for neighbor because her *yes* made possible Jesus' birth into the world to save us.

However, in effect, there are really three great commandments. Calling us to love our neighbor as ourselves, Jesus implicitly commands us to love ourselves. In many cases, when people do not love others, they are often loving them as much as they love themselves, which is not very much. If we want to love others authentically, we first have to love ourselves.

The other question is who is our neighbor. This question does not arise in Matthew's Gospel, but it arises in Luke's Gospel, and Jesus answered it with the parable of the Good Samaritan. To justify himself, the scholar of the law asked Jesus who was his neighbor. He was looking for Jesus to create a boundary between neighbors whom we are required to love and non-neighbors whom we are not required to love. However, at the end of the parable, Jesus turned the question around: "*Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?*" [Lk. 10:36]. Jesus was calling us to an inclusive rather than an exclusive understanding of neighbor.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul suggests some of the components of love for God. At Paul's preaching, the Thessalonians "*turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to await his Son from heaven whom he raised from the dead.*" According to Paul, if we are going to love God above all things, we have to turn away from the idols in our own lives, i.e., everything we put before God. Second, we have to believe in Jesus and become imitators of Jesus.

However, it is today's reading from the Book of Exodus which challenges us the most: "*Thus says the Lord: '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.'*" Pope Francis constantly calls us to go out to the margins and to the marginalized. In the Old Testament, widows, orphans, and aliens were the most marginalized, most vulnerable people in society. This reading should challenge us as a society and as individuals to look at our attitudes toward immigrants and immigration and toward children at risk.

My brothers and sisters, in today's Gospel, Jesus challenges us to an inclusive understanding of neighbor. Today two of the biggest challenges facing us in our country are immigration policy and law and at-risk children. Paraphrasing Jesus' question to the scholar of the law, Jesus is challenging us, "Which of you have made yourself neighbor to the marginalized in your society?"