

My Brothers and Sisters,

When a scribe asked Jesus which was the first of all the commandments, Jesus, quoting the book of Deuteronomy, replied, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*” However, Jesus immediately added the second, this time quoting from the book of Leviticus, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”

Neither of these commandments was new with Jesus. Both came from the Old Testament. However, what was new was that Jesus linked them together. In other words, Jesus’ new teaching was that love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable. For example, in his First Letter, St. John would make the point that we cannot love the God we cannot see if we do not love the neighbor whom we can see [4:20]. He would then suggest that love for God is the basis for love of neighbor because if we love a father, we cannot help loving his sons and daughters [5:1-2].

Actually, the two great commandments are really three commandments. Implicit in “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” is Jesus’ commandment that we love ourselves. In reality, many people fail to love others precisely because they do love others as they love themselves, which is not very much. Like love of God and love of neighbor, love of neighbor and love of self are inseparable. If we do not genuinely love ourselves, we can never truly love others. Ultimately, however, the basis for love of self, love of neighbor, and love of God is God’s love for us in Jesus Christ.

Although the two commandments in today’s Gospel were not new, at the Last Supper Jesus did give us a new commandment which raised the bar. Loving our neighbors as ourselves was no longer the standard. Rather, Jesus said, “*Love one another as I have loved you*” [Jn. 15:12]. Immediately prior, Jesus demonstrated humble service, servant-leadership, by washing the feet of his disciples. Immediately after, looking toward his death, he said to his disciples, “*Greater love than this no one has that one lay down one’s life for one’s friends*” [Jn. 15:13].

Jesus presents the two great commandments in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. In each of the Gospels, the conversation surrounding the commandments is presented a little differently. In our Gospel today, the scribe affirms Jesus’ answer. However, I would suggest that by repeating Jesus’ two great commandments, he was making them his own. He was internalizing them. In other words, it is not enough that we know the two great commandments. It not even enough that we act in loving ways toward God and others. We are called to love God and neighbor from our hearts. If we do, our values will be authentic human, Christian values. If our values are authentic human, Christian values, we will live as sons and daughters of God and true brothers and sisters of one another.

We see the consequences of not living the two great commandments every night on the news. Violence is rampant in our city, in our country, and throughout the world. We saw a tragic example of this last Saturday when eleven Jewish worshipers were killed inside the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in an anti-Semitic rampage.

My brothers and sisters, Jesus’ two great commandments of the New Covenant remind us that love and relationships are what are most important in life. We might even say that Jesus died for love: he was put to death because he preached and lived love as the only ultimately decisive reality. He offered his life to God for us; by so doing, he joined love of God and love of us in one act. Dying on the cross, Jesus taught us that all true love is self-revealing, self-giving, and self-sacrificing.