

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, when the Pharisee tests Jesus by asking him which commandment in the law is greatest, Jesus' teaches us that the foundation of all Christian living, all Christian morality, can be found in the two great commandments: we are to love God first and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Christian morality is always covenant morality, our response to the love of God who first loved us. Loving God first and our neighbors as ourselves is our response to the God who first loved us.

It is important, however, to realize that neither of these commandments was new with Jesus. The commandment to love God first came from the book of Deuteronomy; the commandment to love others as we love ourselves came from the book of Leviticus. The novelty of these commandments was that Jesus linked them together inseparably.

The larger question is why Jesus linked them inseparably. Dying on the cross, he offered his life to God for us, in other words, joining love for God and love for us perfectly in the same act. St. John drew the logical consequence for us in his First Letter: "*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].

Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The first 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 wanted 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]. In other words, Jesus was calling us to an inclusive rather than an exclusive understanding of neighbor.

Today's first reading suggests a very inclusive definition of neighbor. In Exodus, our neighbors are the most vulnerable, the least powerful, among us, some of whom are the most different from us: the resident aliens, widows, orphans, the poor and the needy. In other words, to fulfill Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves, it is not sufficient that we love those who are friends or those who are most like us. 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. If the resident aliens, widows, orphans, the poor and the needy were the most vulnerable, the least powerful, the most different in Israelite society, some of those same groups are among the most vulnerable, least powerful, and the most marginalized in our society. Besides these groups, who else among us are most vulnerable, least powerful, and most marginalized?

My brothers and sisters, what does it mean to love others as we love ourselves? The simplest answer is the best answer but the hardest to live: the Golden Rule. Treat others in their situation the way we would want to be treated in the same situation. Do not treat others in a given situation in a way we would not want to be treated in the same situation. Jesus calls us to be compassionate, to be sensitive and responsive to others, to place ourselves in their shoes.

Unfortunately, if we do not really love ourselves, it is very difficult to really love others. Consequently, the commandment to love others as we love ourselves implicitly commands us to love ourselves. Therefore, we probably need to add a second Golden Rule. Treat yourself the way a best friend would treat you. Do not treat yourself in ways that a best friend would not treat you.