

My Brothers and Sisters,

Salvation history is all about relationships: God's relationship with us, our relationship with God, and our relationships with one another. The Old Testament is the story of God's covenant relationship with Israel. Jesus established a new covenant between God and us in his divine-human person and sealed it by his death on the cross. In today's Gospel, as part of this story, one of the scribes asked Jesus which is the first of all the commandments. Jesus responded with what are sometimes called the Two Great Commandments of the New Covenant.

Some people have mistakenly believed that these two commandments originated with Jesus. Rather, both commandments come from the Old Testament. The commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength comes from the Book of Deuteronomy, as we heard in today's Old Testament reading. Every Jew would agree that this is indeed the first and greatest commandment. Although the scribe only asked for the first and greatest, Jesus immediately added, "*The second is this: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself'*"

What was new was that Jesus joined the two commandments together. Jesus taught that love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated. We cannot love God if we do not love our neighbor. As St. John wrote, "*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].

However, Jesus did not simply say, "*Love your neighbor,*" but "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Just as we cannot love God without loving our neighbor, we cannot love our neighbor unless we love ourselves. The problem in many cases is that people do love their neighbors as they love themselves, which is not very much. People who do not love themselves find it very difficult to truly love others. People who love themselves are very capable of loving others. Implicitly, Jesus is also commanding us to love ourselves.

If we love our neighbors as we love ourselves in the best sense of that word, we fulfill the whole law. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul captures the relationship between Jesus' second great commandment and the Ten Commandments: "*Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this saying, (namely) 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law*" [13:8-10].

The practical question, of course, is how do we know if what we are doing or not doing is love. Again, Jesus gives us a practical and almost infallible answer in the Golden Rule: "*Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.*" [Mt. 7:12]. The opposite is equally true: "Do not do to others whatever you would not have them do to you." According to William Barclay, "In its negative form this rule is in fact the basis of all ethical teaching, but no one but Jesus ever put it in its positive form. Many voices had said, 'Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you,' but no voice had ever said, 'Do to others what you would have them do to you'"

My brothers and sisters, the most profound expression of the meaning of Jesus' command to love others is found in John's Gospel at the Last Supper: "*This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*" [15:12-13]. In other words, to love others as Jesus loves us is to be self-revealing, self-giving, and self-sacrificing.