

**EWTN Family Celebration**  
**Homily for the Vigil of the 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**  
Most Rev. Felipe de Jesús Estevez, Bishop of St. Augustine  
Jacksonville, Florida  
Saturday, November 3, 2018

Gospel Passage: Mark 12: 28b-34

What was it that motivated the scribe in the Gospel today to ask Jesus: “*Which is the first of the commandments?*” This man of letters, who might have found life quite complicated responding to 630 commandments of the Jewish Law, was obviously searching for something beyond what he already knew – and he was deeply impacted by Jesus’ answer. His search for something deeper is, in reality, the search of every human heart.

Jesus, the Master, urges him to keep religion simple by pointing to the magnificent teaching of Deuteronomy: “*The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*” And to this primary commandment, Jesus added: “*...and to love your neighbor as yourself.*” To Jesus, these two loves are inseparable – like two sides of the same coin that cannot be pulled apart without doing damage to the whole. St. Irenaeus would summarize this union of divine and human love in the beautiful phrase, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.”

It’s a way of saying that the love of God is incomplete without expressing it outwardly in the love of neighbor; and conversely, the love neighbor is never authentic if it is not rooted in the mystery of divine love.

The Apostle John understood Jesus’ words best when he wrote: “*God first loved us. If anyone says, my love is fixed on God but hates his brother, he is a liar. One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen*” (1 John 4: 19-20).

We are all still shocked by last week’s massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Pope Francis commented rightly that “all of us are wounded by this inhuman act of violence.” Incidents like this show us the terrible face of *man’s inhumanity to man*. Such an act of hate against mostly defenseless elderly people praying in a house of God shows what happens when hates runs its course in the human heart.

This atrocity only serves to remind us that sacrificial love is the antidote to all the evils of our world. Jesus showed admiration for the scribe who had grasped something beyond the Law. In a moment of insight, the man understood that loving your neighbor as yourself “*is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.*” The Prophet Hosea had already taught that “*it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts*” (6, 6).

At the same time, Jesus qualified his admiration by saying that the scribe was “*not far from the kingdom of God.*” Jesus did not say that the man had already entered, because something more than knowledge and insight is necessary for membership in the Kingdom of God. The search for understanding must bear fruit in *deeds*. True worship of God nurtures love of neighbor in and through the works of mercy.

Indeed God is love. Pope Francis says that the very name of God is Mercy. Jesus reveals God's mercy especially in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is a real portrait of Jesus who is not indifferent to the plight of the neighbor and treats him with tender care and extreme generosity. Yes, that beautiful parable shows a man who loved his neighbor "*to the extreme*" (John 13: 1).

Jesus' loving to the extreme is best seen at the summit of the Cross. The letter to the Hebrews recognizes Him as the Eternal Priest and this Mass we celebrate here does make present his unique sacrifice because his priesthood is forever, an eternal font of grace flowing from his wounded side sanctifying us anew, saving us truly from the power of sin.

As we reflect on our Lord's sacrifice on Calvary, we must pray for the Church and the priesthood today with deep fervor. We are passing through our own Calvary right now, a crisis of deep proportions that shakes us to the core. It is a crisis brought about by our *lack of love* for God and neighbor, one which has been under the surface for a long time and is coming to light now, one which we may see as a purifying force of conversion and change. Even though this crisis deeply challenges us and our Christian witness to the world, it is also true that the answer to it is in the very message of today's Gospel: a return to authentic charity, to a fervent love of God expressed in our love of neighbor. We believe that love is the most transformative and healing power in the world.

Loving our neighbor today has many concrete expressions: welcoming immigrants; protecting the unborn and the terminally ill; building strong families. It means advocating for the rehabilitation of prisoners and recognizing them not as criminals but as our brothers and sisters. In the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, it also means loving creation by protecting it from pollution, destruction, and carelessness. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are never easy, so we often need to be reminded of love's true power. In his famous passage on love, St. Paul said, "*There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, and its power to endure*" (I Cor 13: 7).

Thinking back to the scribe in the Gospel, we are reminded that the *search* to understand the things of God is essential, but it is not sufficient to enter the Kingdom. We must express our love in deeds, and for that, we need God's help. Each one of us can ask the grace for which St. Faustina prayed; namely, "to be completely transformed into God's mercy and become its living reflection, letting mercy pass through our hearts to our neighbors, our eyes looking for what is beautiful in others, giving heed to their needs, pains and meanings, never speaking negatively of others, our hands filled with good deeds, especially the most difficult and toilsome tasks, hurrying like Our Lady of the Visitation, to assist our neighbors, especially those who are suffering."

In a society where love seems to be growing cold, it is more important than ever to ask for the grace to love to the extreme and to never forget what St. John of the Cross taught so clearly, that ... "*At the end of our life, we will be judged by love.*"