

Homily for Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The other day I had to run into the post office to mail something to the Diocesan offices. Have you noticed that they ask you a lot of questions when you go to mail something? Like – would you like delivery confirmation on that? Would you like any stamps today? Is there anything inside that’s perishable, breakable, or flammable? Speaking of which, there once was a very gracious lady who was mailing an old family Bible to her brother in another part of the country. “Is there anything breakable in here”, asked the postal clerk? The lady graciously quipped, “Only the Ten Commandments”. Wa-wa.

Now, my purpose in telling you this lame joke wasn’t to see if I could make it in stand-up comedy – I know I’m better off keeping my day job. Rather, drawing our attention back to the first reading today in the Book of Deuteronomy, we hear Moses talking to the Israelites about this really important *command* they are to keep – a *command* that’s “not too mysterious and remote” – a *command* that’s not up in the sky – a *command* that’s not across the sea – but, a *command* that’s in their mouths and in their hearts. And what on earth is this *command* that Moses is talking about?

Well, in one of our other readings today, the Gospel, a scholar of the Jewish Law gives us the answer. The scholar asks Jesus how he can inherit eternal life. To which, Jesus asks him, “What is written in the law?” Knowing the law very well, the scholar quotes two important passages from the Old Testament: “you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength”, AND “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And he gets the answer right – well technically.

You see, this scholar knew that love of God and love of neighbor was essential to the Jewish Law: in fact, it was the means of inheriting eternal life. As a good Jew, he knew who God was, and he knew what it meant to love Him. But when it came to who his *neighbor* was, for him and for many people of his time, it wasn't quite so clear. According to popular interpretations of the day, your neighbor was often interpreted strictly to mean only your countryman or your fellow citizen, as opposed to foreigners or pagans. And so applying **that** to the parable in today's Gospel, we see that the victim, the priest, and the Levite were all fellow Jews, countrymen, compatriots. So, if the three of them were technically neighbors, why didn't the priest or the Levite help their half-dead countryman on the side of the road?

“Well, is he *really* my neighbor”, they must have asked themselves? “I mean, according to the Law, we’re also obligated to keep ritual purity, which means we have to avoid contact with blood and the dead; otherwise, we’d be sinning, and then we’d have to go through this big involved ritual to be purified. Oh well, I guess we should just pass him by.” And so they did.

But, that’s the whole point of the story. Jesus wanted to teach the scholar of the Law just what it meant to love your neighbor. He wanted him to understand that if the Law is summed up by love of God and love of neighbor, then love just can’t be some ideal in a book, or a warm feeling inside. Rather in order to really *be* love it has to be put into action. But here’s the catch – it requires both giving and receiving.

You see, the Samaritan reached out in love to his Jewish neighbor, even though he knew how Jews despised his people as half-breeds. And at the same time, the Jewish victim had to let himself be vulnerable before this “enemy” and receive the love he offered him. Love of neighbor is a two-way street. It requires risk on the part of both parties in both giving and receiving. And according to Pope John Paul II, the family is the perfect “school” to really learn this love of neighbor more. In the family, each person finds themselves at different times in the roles of both the Samaritan and the victim. There are times when we can offer help to the other, and there are times when we need to receive help from the other.

But, sometimes isn't it just easier to take the part of the priest or the Levite and make excuses of why not to get involved? Or isn't it easier sometimes to prefer to sit in our hurt, and not let *that* person help me? Love of neighbor means being willing to be vulnerable – to give and to receive love. And that can be so hard in our families sometimes.

But fortunately God doesn't expect us to do anything that He Himself hasn't already done for us. And in fact, when we look to Jesus as the perfect Son of God, we see Him who took flesh to become our neighbor – the sinners that we are. And as our neighbor, Jesus loves us by making Himself perfectly vulnerable for us in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist He comes to our need when we are defeated and downtrodden and on the sides of the road in our lives, and He heals us. And all we are called to do in return is to be vulnerable enough to receive Him in love. God bless you.