

Homily for the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

How we treat one another speaks a lot about the faith that we possess. In other words, how well we love in action the brother and sister we can see really determines the degree that we love the God we cannot see. Isn't this what Jesus is essentially saying in our Gospel today? Loving God with our whole heart, soul, and mind requires that we love our neighbor as ourselves; and really loving our neighbor presupposes a love for God that leads us to go outside of ourselves to sacrifice for others.

Now, why did Jesus respond this way when the Pharisees asked Him, "which commandment in the law is the greatest"? Well, as we heard in our Gospel last week, which actually proceeds today's passage – "the Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap him in speech." And so in today's Gospel, they come back trying a new question to trap Jesus with. But, as I said last week, when it comes to questions, Jesus is not merely in the business of giving simple yes or no answers. And so, even though the Pharisees ask Jesus for one commandment, He gives them two, underscoring that the whole law and prophets – that is, the entirety of their faith – depended on these TWO commandments. And, by the way they were treating Jesus, plotting against Him and trying to entrap Him, the point was made: how could they really then love God? Jesus got them again! And they got even more angry, which eventually led them to seek Jesus' crucifixion and death.

Did you ever have the experience, or know of a situation, where two people have been so mad at one another for so long a time that they don't even remember the reason they're not talking to each other anymore – they just know they don't like each other – even though they don't know why anymore? I think this could have happened with the Pharisees. While the Pharisees were trying to outshine Jesus and show everyone how smart they were, Jesus caught them in their own net of pride; and the humiliation they meant for Jesus, recoiled on themselves. And so, they just got madder and madder.

Similarly, this year as we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant reformation (the exact date being this Tuesday), I wonder if Christians of the Lutheran and Catholic Churches have been in such a situation for much of our history. I mean, how many of you remember growing up when you weren't allowed to step foot in a Lutheran or Protestant church? Or, how many of our families were scandalized when a Catholic and a non-Catholic married one another? And this was nothing compared to the centuries prior when Catholics and Lutherans killed and persecuted one another. Now, I ask you, how did any of such actions show forth the love and mercy of Jesus Christ? No wonder so many people are so suspicious when it comes to the Gospel – we haven't even done a good job of loving, or at least of respectfully treating, one another!

As Vatican II has taught in many different ways, dialogue, accompanied by mutual respect, is so important and necessary for growth. True dialogue keeps us from two wrong ways of interacting with those who have views or beliefs that are different. The first I just mentioned – persecuting and ridiculing “the other”. However, the other extreme can be just as dangerous – saying that we’re all really just the same, that our differences don’t matter at all, so just ignore them. How many of you have heard that before? But, we’re not all the same. Everyone can’t be right when they give different answers to the same question.

When it comes to those we disagree with, the answer is not to separate, ignore, or lash out against them. In fact, usually when we do this, it’s because we feel threatened in one way or another. Rather, as the joint statement by both Catholic and Lutheran bishops on the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation states, “We call upon all Lutheran and Catholic parishes and communities to be bold and creative, joyful and hopeful in their commitment to continue the great journey ahead of us. Rather than the conflicts of the past, God’s gift of unity among us shall guide cooperation and deepen our solidarity.” They go on to say, “Aware that the way we relate to one another shapes our witness to the Gospel, we commit ourselves to further growth in communion rooted in baptism as we seek to remove the remaining obstacles that hinder us from attaining full unity.”

My brothers and sisters, dialoguing with other Christians is so important.

Understanding one another more fully, both helps other Christians dispel the myths and inaccuracies they possess about our Catholic faith, and helps us as Catholics to see the areas of commonality that we share with other Christians. Therefore, to act on this, I would like to encourage you to attend the Reformation prayer service that I will be co-leading with Pastor George Scott at Trinity Lutheran church in East Berlin this Monday evening at 7pm. For as the bishops together stated, “We pray to God for inspiration, encouragement and strength so that we may stand together...” In other words, God is the one who desires our unity for the well-being of Christianity and the whole world. And it is only God, with our cooperation, who can bring it about. God bless you.