

Homily for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The story is told of a woman who went to see her pastor about some major marital problems her and her husband were having. She came into his office full of hatred toward her husband. And after telling him the details of his very selfish actions, she said, “Not only do I want to get rid of him, I want to get even. That’s right, before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has me.”

After thinking for a moment, the pastor suggested a plan. He said, “Go home and act *as if* you really loved your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. And go out of your way to be as kind and generous as possible. In other words, make him believe you love him,” he said with a wink. “Then, after you’ve convinced him of your undying love and that you can’t live without him, drop the bomb. Tell him you want a divorce. That’ll really hurt him.” Well, with a twinkle of revenge in her eyes, the woman smiled, saying, “Won’t he ever be surprised!”

So, she went home, and followed the pastor’s instructions “with enthusiasm” – acting “as if.” For two months she showed love, kindness, listening, giving, and sharing. Well, when she didn't return, the pastor worried a little and called. He asked if she had gone through with divorce yet. “Divorce?” she exclaimed. “Not in a million years! I discovered I really did love him.” Shortly after that, their conversation ended. The pastor smiled as he said to himself, “this advice really does work: ‘Fake it till you make it!’”

In our first reading today, we hear Moses impressing upon the people the importance of keeping God's commandments – of not adding to what was commanded, nor subtracting from it – just obeying God's Law. And when we look to the ancient Jewish people, we see how they sought to keep God's commandments “to a T”. Their religious leaders determined that in the first five books of the Bible, called the Torah or the Pentateuch, there were 613 individual commandments that had to be obeyed. Now obviously, as Christians, we don't keep those 613 laws. In fact, the majority of them were designed to form together a people – to give Israel a cultural and religious identity. And so, in Christ, that is no longer needed. But those commandments pertaining to God's eternal law and to morality – above all, the 10 Commandments – these are still binding.

But, this raises the question: “Are God's commandments meant to be an exact rulebook for how we live our lives?” Think about it: “Are we supposed to follow the 10 Commandments, and period that's it?” Then I'm a “good person”? Well, they are rules not to be broken – we are not to violate the 10 Commandments. But, this is just the bare bones! I propose that you and I are *not* disciples of Jesus simply by keeping the 10 Commandments, and period that's it. They're part of our Judeo-Christian heritage – reminding us mostly of the things we ought not do. But more than this, to be a disciple of Jesus is to keep His commandment to “love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength” and to “love our neighbor as ourselves.”

It's true that these two great teachings of Jesus summarize the 10 Commandments – the first three to love God, the second seven to love our neighbor. But the whole point of God commanding us not to do certain things, is to enable us to be free to do others. By avoiding sin, that is those transgressions against God's commandments, we are free to live out God's greatest commandment – to love. Not committing sins is not the definition of a good Christian – that's just the groundwork for the Christian life. Rather, being a Christian is above all about love – in particular the sacrificial love that Jesus shows us in the Eucharist and on the cross.

And that's where our second reading comes in. James says, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only.” Therefore, if we really love, it's not just enough to say, “I love you, honey” or “I love you, God”. Instead, we have to put our money where our mouth is, and show love by our actions. Who we are is revealed by our actions. And if we want to live out Jesus' greatest commandment to love God and to love our neighbor, then we must demonstrate it by what we do.

Now let's be honest, sometimes we don't feel like being loving – sometimes we're really just mad at those around us. And sometimes we don't feel like keeping God's commandments either. Just look at how many people got caught on the Ashley Madison website being unfaithful to their spouses! Kind of like the Pharisees in today's first reading in that they kept on their finger the wedding band that everyone could see, but threw away the wedding band around their heart when no one was looking!

We have to learn a lesson from the woman in the story above, who was so angry and wanted to divorce her husband. Feelings are not facts! Sometimes we all feel contrary to the truth of the matter. And while the pastor's advice of "fake it till you make it" might sound a little simplistic or insensitive, in the end the woman's actions really changed her feelings. In other words, a change of motion resulted in her changed emotions. My friends, loving as Christ taught us is accomplished, not so much by our words and promises, as it is our often-repeated deeds. God bless you.