

Homily for October 24, 1999
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Exodus 22:20-26
1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10
Matthew 22:34-40

Love remains our ever-elusive goal.

“Master, which commandment is the greatest?”

And of course Jesus answers: “Love.” What verb does more work? What noun is more invoked? That’s the problem. The word “love” means too much and too little.

It stands for (and justifies) just about everything: strong desires, imperial needs, an obsessive ache, murder, atrocity, lying. People have done things for “the love of God” that God assuredly disavows. They have done things for others that have crushed the very objects of their obsession. They have done things for self-love that destroyed their very souls. Thus, the appeal to love is often not only trivial, it can be lethal.

I think there is no more misunderstood word than love. It means sex to some. Thrill to others. Feeling wonderful to most. Love should fix things, change them, renew them. It ought to make us feel better about ourselves and the world. It must make life light and easy, a joy, and an ecstasy, bliss. As the song says, “Love is all you need.”

Imagine the embarrassment and confusion then when such a word shows up as the summation of the law and the prophets.

Yep, Jesus said it. He was responding to a question posed by a lawyer, of all people, who was wondering which commandment of the law was the greatest. His response? “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment, the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now at first sight, this answer was not earth-shaking in its originality. Our Jewish ancestors had put these two together centuries before. The great Shema, a prayer that devout Jews recite every morning and night, is straight from the book of Deuteronomy (6:5). This command to love God absolutely was to be “written on the heart” and drilled into the memory of every child. Jesus’ mother, Mary, we may suppose, did her job well.

The second part of the answer – “You must love your neighbor as yourself” – is lifted from Leviticus (19:18). What might have raised some eyebrows is that Jesus puts both of these commands on equal footing. The second is just like the first: our love of neighbor mirrors our love of God. Jesus, mind you, was not asked for two great laws, but he gave two as one. The entire will of God and purpose of our life is to love God with our whole being and our neighbors as ourselves.

So we're back to love, that chameleon, a chameleon that hides in the hue of everything and disappears into any context available.

But not so fast. This love isn't just anything. It involves heart and will, soul and life, mind and strength. It requires an awesome fidelity. It makes demands. Love is not mere ardor; it is arduous.

...But not merely arduous and can even be a lot of fun as in our kindness outreaches which are part of our parish effort to love God and neighbor in such a concrete and simple way as raking leaves. God's Spirit can and does touch hearts through totally unexpected acts of kindness. In fact, next weekend all are welcome to bring a rake and meet in the church parking lot at 11:00 a.m. and together we will rake as many yards as we can and leave a card saying: "We are glad we had the chance to serve you! We hope this small gift brings some light into your day. It's a simple way of saying that God loves you - no strings attached. Let us know if we can be of more assistance." And the card has our church's name, address and phone number. Would you believe...a week ago a young man registered in our parish who remembered having received that card and having his leaves raked a year ago when we did this for the first time.

Anyone who thinks that love is an easy path should consult "The More Excellent Way" of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 12 and 13. We can get into the passage, often heard at weddings. It could well be read every day and night of a married life or of any life.

What is love? Love is patience. It is kindness. It is not jealous or conceited, rude or selfish. It does not take offense. Nor is it resentful. It is always ready to trust, to excuse and to endure whatever comes.

Love, when we do it, is the eternal in us, what lasts of us. Love is what brings us to this table and causes us to see in one another the Christ we receive at this table.

Jesus stood in the tradition of great Jewish teachers in answering the question as to which commandment of the law was the weightiest. Rabbinic tradition records an incident in which Rabbi Hillel, a famous first century teacher, was approached by a heathen, who said, "Teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Rabbi Hillel responded, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary on it. Go and learn."

Love remains our ever-elusive goal.