

Homily for Sunday, September 6, 2020:

In our Second Reading today, Paul packs a lot of teaching into a few words about Love.

Immediately before this passage, Paul is speaking of giving what is expected to the rightful authorities. Now he sums it up by saying, “Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another...” This brings us into the area of justice. JUSTICE can be said to be giving to another what is due to that person. If we do that, we do not owe them anything; except, as Paul says, Love, which we always owe people.

This calls for another definition – LOVE. Love is not mainly a feeling to which we are enslaved. Feelings come and go. Love belongs in that area of ourselves we call the WILL. It is from the will that we form wants and desires and convictions and decisions. LOVE is WILLING the good of the other, as other. In other words, we do not Love someone for our benefit. We want the best for that person – which means we desire for them a holy life in this life that they may be in heaven for eternity.

Paul may be speaking to many Gentiles, but he is a good Jew who believes God gave the Ten Commandments through Moses. Paul believes in the Ten Commandments. In our passage today he mentions the Commandments which concern our relationship with others. And Paul says that these are acts of love. If we love, we will not kill, steal, or commit adultery. We will honor them, and work for their good.

Paul delivers a line we have heard in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There, Our Lord is asked what is the greatest of all the Commandments in the Old Testament. In each of these instances, the answer is that we love God with our entire selves. But it does not stop there. We are told another commandment to go with it, “the second is like it.” And that commandment which is like the Greatest Commandment is what Paul says today, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”

In the gospels, Christ commands us to love. Probably all of us can immediately call out the main one, as we have heard them and tried to live them our entire lives.

“Love God and Neighbor.”

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

“Greater love no one has than to lay down his life for a friend.”

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

Because we are immersed in that kind of love, we understand that love is the driving force for what our First Reading and Gospel speak of today.

God tells Ezekiel that he is to warn people from sin, because sin leads to destruction. For that reason, Ezekiel will be responsible for the person if he does not warn them.

And Christ today gives instruction to the disciples (the disciples back then, and us disciples today) on how to deal with someone who has sinned against them. It is interesting instruction. Quite often Our Lord's teachings are given in parable and exaggeration. Today, it sounds extremely practical and immediate. Jesus sounds like Paul in his letters, just as today Paul sounds like Jesus gave during His ministry.

Our Lord speaks of approaching someone with respect; speaking to them first privately, then slowly involving others. It is advice as wise and needed today (and as hard to put into action today) as it was to the first Christians.

The respect continues even if there is no reconciliation at that time. Back then, if the community treated someone as a Gentile or a tax collector – what did that mean? It meant two things.

One – there was separation from them. But that official act by the Church was as it is today, rare as it officially is. It was meant to be time for the person to realize where they were without the graces that come from communion with the Church.

Two – how did they treat Gentiles and Tax Collectors? They engaged them. They sought their conversion. They turned the other cheek and sought to their needs.

And so it is for us today. We are to owe nothing to anyone but love. Love is seeking the best of others, helping them in their need, telling them about Christ, and reconciliation. It is sometimes hard when people walk away from us. But let us never walk away from others. Let us continue to pay the love we owe others. Let us Love as Christ loves. Let us love our neighbor as ourselves.

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