

**This Sunday's Readings** – the 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Today's readings are as follows:

- Exodus 22:20-26
- Psalm 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51
- 1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10
- Matthew 22:32-40

The theme of today's readings is simply this – love God and love your neighbor.

The first reading is from the Book of Exodus, a Greek word meaning “departure”. Exodus is the second book of the Pentateuch (another Greek word meaning five books). The Pentateuch is the basis of the bible and to the Hebrews is known as the Torah. Even though the author of the Pentateuch is attributed to Moses, it was actually written sometime during the reign of King David, a couple of hundred years after Moses' death. Still, that does not mean that it wasn't based on Moses' writings and or oral tradition. This particular section on social justice is from the section titled The Covenant with God. This takes place after the Israelites were freed from bondage in Egypt. They are camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, where Yahweh enters into a covenant with the people. The laws we read in this section as well as the Ten Commandments were revolutionary for that time. It converted the Israelites into a civilized community. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1999 syndicated column explains – “In a 1968 Catholic Biblical Quarterly article, Quentin Quesnell tackled the distinction between "Gospel" and "law." The latter, Quesnell wrote, is usually "a regulation of good order for practical living; the former, "a fundamental challenge to the believing Christian to live up to the revelation of the cross and resurrection." The authors of the Christian Scriptures certainly understood Quesnell's distinction. But even the ancient Jews who never experienced Jesus believed their Mosaic Law was more than just a guide for practical living. The authors of the Hebrew Scriptures often proclaimed that Yahweh's laws arose from Yahweh's relationship with Yahweh's people " a relationship they expected the Chosen People to imitate " and not from Yahweh's desire that things "run right." We see this ideal started in the first reading (Ex 22:20-26). Jews are not to care for aliens and the poor because such behavior promotes good social order, but because Yahweh both "hears the cry" of those who are helpless and is "compassionate" to them. Yahweh's actions should be Yahweh's people's actions”.

This ties directly into the Gospel reading from Matthew. There are 613 Laws of Moses in the Jewish Torah. They are divided into two groups: 248 are positive (thou shall) and 365 are negative (thou shall not). How can anyone remember all of them? Here the Pharisees are asking which of the 613 laws is the most important. Jesus' answer summarizes all the laws into two – love God and love your neighbor. Jesus' message echoes the old saying “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” or as Confucius ((551 – 479 BC), the great Chinese sage, was born June 19th, 551 B.C. at Shang-ping, in the country of Lu. His own name was Kong, but his disciples called him Kong-fu-tse, (i.e. Kong the Master, or Teacher,) which the Jesuit missionaries Latinized into Confucius) said “Do not do to others as you would have others not do to you”. It takes both love of God and love of your neighbor to attain the Kingdom of Heaven. You can't have one without the other. These two greatest commandments are the basis of all

the laws. There is another reason why Matthew included this episode in his Gospel. As Fr. Roger Karban states in his syndicated column – “But Matthew doesn't insert this passage into his Gospel simply because he wants his readers to know about confrontations which the Galilean carpenter had with His frequent nemeses: the Pharisees. He included this particular story because some in his Jewish/Christian community -- only 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection -- were beginning to put extraneous religious practices at the center of their faith, practices which sidetracked their love of God and neighbor”. That’s exactly what happened to the Jewish religious leaders at the time of Jesus. They lost the true meaning of the Law that was given to them by Yahweh on Mt. Sinai. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this commentary on today’s Gospel reading – “The summary of the law is not original with Jesus. Its two parts represent combination of Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18. Nor is the combination itself original to Jesus, for it is found in at least one earlier Jewish work, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, an amalgam of wisdom and apocalyptic materials. Jesus’ thought was similarly cast in both molds, wisdom and apocalyptic, and the summary of the law represents the wisdom facet of his teaching. Jesus undoubtedly appeared not only as the final apocalyptic preacher but also as the authoritative declarer of God’s wisdom. In the Jewish parallels, the two commandments stand side by side, as a convenient summary. Jesus understands the interlocking of the two commandments in a new and quite radical way. You cannot have one without the other. Without the love of neighbor, the love of God remains a barren emotion; and without the love of God, love of neighbor is but a refined form of self-love”.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds this comment on today’s Gospel reading – “Jesus’ statement on the greatest commandment is probably the best-known and most-discussed passage in all of Scripture. Placed in its Mediterranean cultural context, it takes on a fresh and concrete meaning. The episode is yet another example of the continuous cultural game of challenge and riposte. The text clearly states that the Pharisee intends his question as a challenge (“to test him,” v. 34). (The Greek manuscript evidence for “lawyer” is not very strong. It was probably inserted here due to influence from Luke 10:25.)

## THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF THE COMMANDMENTS

On the face of it, the question appears very honest. The Pharisees identified 613 commandments in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). Two hundred forty-eight were positive (“thou shalt”) and three hundred sixty-five were negative (“thou shalt not”). How could anyone remember all of them? Were some more important than others? Some teachers distinguished between “heavy” and “light” commandments. The “Ten” (e.g., honor father and mother) are examples of heavy or serious commandments. An example of a light or less serious commandment is Deuteronomy 22:6-7, which stipulates that a person who finds a bird’s nest with a mother sitting on eggs or with young may take the young but must let the mother go. The reason for observing both is “that it may go well with you, and that you may live long” (Deut 5:16; 22:7). Another custom was to sum up the Torah’s commandments in a small number of precepts or a summary statement. Thus

King David proposed eleven (Ps 15), Isaiah six (33:15), Micah three (6:8), and Amos only one (5:4). In reply to the Pharisee's question about the "greatest commandment," Jesus combines two: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (citing and amending Deut 6:5). And the second of equal importance is "love your neighbor as yourself" (citing Lev 19:18). Jesus does not discard other commandments. He explicitly adds: "On these two commandments hang *all* the law and the prophets." Essentially, Jesus' answer is very orthodox, very traditional. If there is any distinctiveness, it lies in his understanding of neighbor which he explains in Luke 10:29-33 but not at this point. (Leviticus specifies neighbor as brother, that is, fellow Israelite. Luke's Jesus expands the concept of neighbor to be more inclusive.)

## LOVE

More importantly, what does Jesus understand by love? Mediterranean cultural anthropology sheds some light. Remember that our ancestors in the faith were strongly group centered. The group was family, village, neighborhood, and factions (like the Twelve, the Pharisees, etc.) which a person might join. The group gave a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, and advice for actions to be taken or avoided. The group was an external conscience exerting enormous pressure on its individual members. In this context, love and hate are best understood as group attachment and group disattachment. Whether emotion or affection is involved is beside the point. The major feeling in love and hate is a feeling of belonging or not belonging, respectively. Thus, to love God with all one's heart is to be totally attached to God. To love neighbor as self is to be as totally attached to people in one's neighborhood or immediate circle of friends (i.e., fellow Israelites) as one is to one's family group. This has been and continues to be the normal way of life in the Mediterranean world, unless feuding develops. To "hate one's father, mother," and others as Luke's Jesus (14:26) requires of his followers means to detach oneself from family and join the Jesus group. Paul says the greatest among the virtues faith, hope, and charity is charity, that is, love or attachment to the group. The group-attachment aspect of love poses a challenge to individualistically oriented, emotional American believers. Which commandment would American believers say is the greatest? And what does that mean?"

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