

## Thirty First Sunday in Ordinary Time: Any Questions?

*After this, no one had the courage to ask him any more questions.*

When I taught down here in Florida at Mary Help of Christians School or up in East Boston at Dominic Savio High School, I never minded if the students asked me questions. I taught science and mathematics. These are difficult subjects with constant exposure to new concepts for high school people. Questions were one of the ways that the students could grasp the subject matter. In fact, I think that everyone would agree that a good teacher wants his or her students to ask questions. However, every now and then a student asks questions not to try to learn, but to see if he or she can expose a weakness the teacher may have in the field. An extremely intelligent student might ask a question that he or she knows the answer to just as a test to see how much the teacher knows. If the teacher makes the mistake of guessing what the correct answer would be and is wrong, the student will then disparage the teacher to the rest of the class.

This is the type of question that our gospel reading refers to when it says that after Jesus answered the young man, no one had the courage to ask him any more questions. People could not trap Jesus, because they knew that he understood far more than they could ever grasp.

In its context in the *Gospel of Mark* Jesus had just answered the main question that was debated by ancient Jewish scholars, and is still debated by the Pharisees among us, and ourselves when we get into a pharisaical frame of mind. That question is: What is the most important thing that I have to do to serve God. What is the first commandment? What is the one thing that, well, if I do this, I don't have to worry about any of the other commandments? How can I get the most reward for the minimum of service to God?

Jesus responded with the Shema Israel, the ancient prayer of the Book of Deuteronomy that the Jewish people said every morning and every evening, the prayer that they kept in a packet at their doors so they could take it with them wherever they went, "*Shema Israel, Hear O Israel, You shall love the Lord with your whole heart, whole mind and whole soul,*" to that Jesus added a small verse from the Book of Leviticus: "*and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

Jesus' simple statements embraced everything we need to do to serve God. And yet, they demand a radical change in our lives and a radical change in our whole perception of religion. Every action of our lives are included in these two laws.

We are all made in God's image and likeness. We are called to reverence the Lord in the many ways in which he is present in his world. When

we love other people, we are loving people who themselves are unique reflections of the presence of God. We cannot love God and hate others. Sometimes people say that they pray hard, they come to Church often, but they don't feel they are making any progress in their spiritual life. When we feel this way we need to ask ourselves if we are at peace with other people. We may not like someone, but if we are full of hatred for someone, we are destroying the love of God within us.

Perhaps the young man of the gospel, and perhaps we, to some degree or other, want a simple list of what not to do to other people. Certainly we priests are always asked, "Father, is it wrong to do this or that?" The great teachers of wisdom throughout history did exactly this. They gave the negative directive: *Don't do to others as you wouldn't want them to do to you.* Jesus is the only person in history who has given a positive directive: *This is what you are to do--Respect God's image within others and reverence this image just as you wish others would respect and reverence the image of God in which you were created.* When we can say, I am only doing what I would want another person to do for me if I were in this situation, then we are living the one commandment of loving God with our whole heart, mind and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves.

People used to ask St. Teresa of Calcutta, Mother Theresa, why she cared for the poor, dying on the streets. Her response was, "How can you love God and not care for his image?" God doesn't expect us to leave our families and go to Calcutta, but he does expect us to reverence his presence in each other. God doesn't want us to be bogged down in a quagmire of laws, but he does expect us to live out the one law of loving Him with all our hearts, minds and souls and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

What does God want from us? What is the First Commandment? We are to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul. And the second Commandment? We are to love all those He created in His image and likeness as we love that image within ourselves.

Any questions?