

The last edition of GoodNews4You will be published on Nov. 21. Please enjoy the following reflection first run in 2018.

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Deuteronomy 6:2-6 and Mark 12:28-34

I taught a young woman once, a single mother of three small children, brilliant and an atheist. When we discussed placing love of God before all others, she protested. Before her children? No way! That would be failing in her responsibility to them. I explained that when the love of God comes first in our hearts, all other loves fall into place. It is not a ranking but a placement of all other loves within that one great love. We can do them better because we have a healthy perspective and they flow from a healthy source.

I think that is what the passages from Deuteronomy and Mark this week are getting at. When Jesus is asked for the greatest of the commandments, he promptly answers with the first part of the Shema, the prayer devout Jews pray twice a day. This spiritual discipline refocuses one's being on the fundamental truth about life, a truth that is easy to forget as we plow through our days. "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!" This can be understood as a declaration of the oneness of God. This oneness implies a singleness of purpose on God's part, an essential drive to be faithful to us. God demonstrated this love by freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and God's faithfulness does not change. It is not something God felt three thousand years ago and stopped. God loves you and me with the same single-heartedness today. This is who God is.

"The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!" can also be understood as a declaration that we choose God as our only deity. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites will soon leave the desert with all its hardships and enter "a land flowing with milk and honey." Moses is concerned that the bounty will charm them into thinking that it comes from the gods worshipped in that land. So he says never lose focus on the true source of all bounty.

We too are easily misled to think that our prosperity or well-being comes from other sources than God. We give the credit to ourselves, because, after all, it was our hard work, our expertise, our ingenuity that got us where we are today. We may think money, a particular political party or tight control do the trick. But no, it is God. Like the Israelites, we need to keep before us the proof of God's effective love in our lives. We can daily recall the dying and rising of Jesus for our sake. We can also wonder at the reality of love in our lives and how it saves us; this love of course comes ultimately from God, the source of all love.

In the gospel, Jesus adds another dimension to our devotion to God. He asks us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Obviously, this is not a new commandment; it comes from Leviticus 19:18, which is at least as old as the Deuteronomic verses. Also, the Torah is filled with commands to care for others as a way of living out the covenant. What is new is a shift in emphasis: love of God is tied to concrete acts of loving others. Why this emphasis? This story is situated in Mark after a series of confrontations between the Jewish leaders and Jesus. He has thrown the moneychangers out of the Temple, rejecting the way the leaders have used prayer to generate wealth. Then they confronted him with a number of theological disputes, hoping to trap him. Now Jesus cuts through all the corruption and the claptrap they have focused on to bring them (and us) to the most important thing, loving God. Furthermore, he sets love of neighbor as a visible sign of the sincerity of our love for God. If the love we have for God is genuine, it will have to flow out in love for others.

This reminds me of something I learned in a developmental psychology class in graduate school. One sign of a healthy marriage is that the love does not stay between the husband and wife. Healthy love cannot help but overflow to others. It must be generative. Obviously, this is seen in the conception of children, but it also flows out in the raising of those children and how we help raise other children. (Think nieces, nephews, scouts and little league teams.) Love also flows out in the ways we contribute to the communities around us. When one has been loved unconditionally and is able to love in return, the result is awesome and transformative and must overflow. Moses, the Torah and Jesus all want us never to lose sight of God's awesome love for us, to love back with as much matching intensity as we can muster and then let that love overflow to those around us. Let us hold this truth ever before us!

- ❖ God sends each of us people whose love for us frees us. In the past week, whose love has freed you?
- ❖ Do you have a prayer practice that refocuses you daily on God? If so, pray it today with extra awareness of God's single-hearted love for you. If not, choose a prayer or action that can be your daily focal point.

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