

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus answered the question with flair. The scribe asked for the greatest commandment, and he listed two—or more since his first commandment already braces two: “The Lord our God is Lord alone” and “You shall love the Lord your God.” Even Jesus’ second commandment, “Love your neighbor” implies another one, “Love yourself.” It’s a little like asking, “What’s the best barbecue in Kansas City?” A lot of us cannot give one answer without giving two or three more. Jewish tradition counts 613 commandments in the Torah, so naming the first constituted a kind of parlor game among rabbis. Jesus deftly reached into distinct parts of the Torah, Deuteronomy and Leviticus, to give his answer.

In Matthew’s version of this conversation, the scribe is trying to trap Jesus, but here in Mark they have a friendly chat that illustrates the commandments Jesus presents. The scribe praises Jesus, and Jesus praises the scribe.

In Luke’s version of this conversation, the scribe follows up with another question, “Who is my neighbor?” That launches the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Book of Leviticus considered neighbors those in physical or familial proximity, but Jesus’ parable busted open the definition of a neighbor.

“Love” seems an odd thing to command because we all fall in love and rather enjoy being in love. But we have to act with love also when we do not feel love. People we do love can point out the times we don’t act as though we love them. Then when you consider that we should also act with love toward neighbors we don’t love, you see why Jesus made love a command.

This week the United Nations opens its Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, the 26th Conference of Parties since 1995, so known as COP26. Pope Francis wrote an encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*, and remains concerned about ecology. He was hoping to go to Glasgow this week but is staying home. He did gather with religious leaders and scientists on the Feast of St. Francis, October 4, to fashion a Joint Appeal. Then he addressed participants in the pre-COP26 Parliamentary Meeting at the Vatican, where he updated them: “At our Meeting, we affirmed, in a spirit of fraternity, an impressive convergence of all our different voices on two points. First, our sorrow at the grave harm inflicted on the human family and its common home; and second, the urgent need for a change of direction, in order to move decisively and firmly away from the *throwaway* culture, prevalent in our society, towards a culture of care.”

It’s hard to love people we love. It’s hard to love people we don’t love. It’s hard to love people we don’t know. It’s also hard to love people who aren’t even born yet. Our church values human life from womb to tomb; we also value lives that have not yet even entered a womb. The actions we perform today will affect the environment of future generations.

One way we can show love of God and love of neighbor is to approach the deliberations in Glasgow this week with the same respectful tone that Jesus and the scribe used in their conversation with each other. In this way, we will act with love in the present as we prepare to make sacrifices on behalf of the people in generations yet to come.

Sunday, October 31, 2021