

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“I love you” is one of the most powerful sentences one human being says to another. It may be a simple factual statement about an inner emotion. But once you’ve said it to the person you love, it creates expectations. Love expects mutuality. One reason you love someone is they love you back. If you say, “I love you,” and the other person does not say it back, tension tightens your body.

Last year I offered a webinar to some adult students about the words of the Mass, many of which are repetitious. We say some formulas every Sunday, like the Creed; we say others several times during the Mass, like “The Lord be with you. And with your Spirit.” And ministers of holy communion repeat the formulas “The Body of Christ” and “The Blood of Christ” dozens of times within the space of a few minutes. It is hard to say those words with meaning every time, but that can make Mass effective.

One of the students said this: “That makes me think of how often I tell my husband, ‘I love you.’ I mean, we say it to each other every day, several times a day. On many days, it’s just part of the routine. But, when we were started seeing each other, the first time I said it to him was such a big deal. It was full of meaning. I should be thinking of that every time I say those words.”

In some families, the members rarely say those words to each other. In other families, people say them a lot. The absence of the words doesn’t mean the absence of love. The presence of those words may not mean the presence of love. But we should connect the words we say to the feelings we have.

When Jesus named the greatest commandment in the law, he said it was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, will all your soul, and with all your mind. He drew that commandment from the Book of Deuteronomy. It’s been around a long time. So, you’d think the bible would be filled with examples of people who not only loved God, but said the words, “I love you,” to God. After all, one of the marks of love is saying the words.

In the New Testament, Jesus has to drag the words out of Simon Peter. He asks three times, “Do you love me?” And in the Old Testament, there is only one recorded instance where people say to God, “I love you.” The words appear at the beginning of Psalm 18, which we sang today as our responsorial: “I love you, Lord, my strength.” God repeatedly states how much he loves us, as in Jeremiah (31:3), “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” But others are like members of a family where saying those words is hard. We know what those words mean. They create expectations. Love expects mutuality. God already loves us. If we tell God, “I love you,” God will expect us to act like it. We may not be ready to say the words. We may not love all the events we attribute to God. We may not be “all in” with this relationship.

Psalm 18 shows that God is all in with us. The verses admit, “I cry out, ‘Praised be the Lord!’ and see, I am saved from my foes.... The Lord gives great victories to his king, and shows merciful love for his anointed.” God’s love never fails. If our love does fail, if we refuse to set aside our sins, if we do not sacrifice for those who love us, if we don’t like the person we’ve become, we can start our conversion by asking God for help. We might start with the words, “I love you.”