

Homily Nov. 4, 2018

“Take to heart these words.” This ancient Scripture verse is the voice of our own loving Creator, begging us to take today’s message into our hearts.

Here’s the question for each one of us:

What is in your own heart today?

We all know how much anger and hatred are “out there” in our world and, sadly, in our country and in our state, maybe now more than ever. In some cases, like the Tree of Life Synagogue mass shooting last Saturday, hate is literally killing us.

But what is in our own hearts? Every one of us is responsible for finding an honest answer to this question.

This is why we all desperately needed to hear today’s readings, right here and right now. In the entire Bible, and in all our centuries of theology and saints and church teachings, the message doesn’t get any clearer than this. Love God with your whole heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. That’s it. That’s our whole job. If we do this, everything else flows naturally. If we do this, we will change the world. And if we fail to do this, then the world becomes a darker and more hateful place.

And although at first this may seem to be two separate commandments, they’re actually two sides of one coin. If our hearts are filled with love for God, then we will also love everyone created in God’s “image and likeness.” We will naturally reach out to them. We will naturally show them kindness, just as we hope for that for ourselves. And on the other side of the coin, if anyone is open to loving all the people made in God’s image, then that person is already loving God, whether they consciously say so or not. It’s a heavenly “buy one, get one free” offer to all of humanity, no strings attached.

Loving God and loving our neighbor isn’t just a polite suggestion. It’s not advice from some trendy internet “life-coach”. This is a commandment from the Lord of all Creation. We just heard this in both our first reading and our Gospel, just to be sure we got the point.

So if what we see in the world around us bothers us or seems about to overwhelm us, there is still hope. God is giving us directions on how to overcome it. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Let me say that again: “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Here's where we have to be honest with ourselves. If we allow our hearts to become cluttered with ongoing anger, resentment, fear, prejudice, selfishness, or hate, then we are willing participants in the problems of the world "out there." We may think we're just standing on the sidelines, but we are actually adding our own contribution to the darkness and the hate.

There's a beautiful line in both the first reading and the Gospel, as the introduction to the commandment to love God and love our neighbor. This verse is the oldest official prayer in the entire Bible. The best translation from the Hebrew is: "Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one."

For at least 3,000 years it's been said or sung in Hebrew in every morning and evening liturgy in every Temple and synagogue in the world. It's also in each Jewish person's private daily devotions. It was prayed in the great Temple of King Solomon in Jerusalem, and by the slaves carried off to captivity in Babylon. It was part of every worship service Jesus attended for every week of his life. It was prayed amid the horrors of the concentration camps of the Holocaust, and it was prayed last Saturday in the Tree of Life Synagogue before the killer burst in and opened fire. "Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one."

We are called to be one with God and one with all our neighbors throughout the world. It is love that makes us one. How ironic that the Tree of Life Synagogue is just three blocks away from the home of TV's beloved Mister Rogers. Mister Rogers was the ordained Presbyterian minister who spent his life gently teaching millions of little children that we are all neighbors. All of us. Every one of us.

If it is love that makes us one, then it is hate that fights to divide us: into us against them, my party against your party, my religion against your religion, my race against your race, winners against losers.

Jesus the Lord asks us to join him in saying, "I am one with God and one with my neighbor." But then the world "out there" urges us to put ourselves in the place of God so we can Lord it over others and say, "I won and my neighbor lost."

If we will allow it, love can make us one. Whatever we find in the world around us begins within each one of us. So let me ask my question once again:

What is in your own heart today?

Silence. Then solo voice, in Hebrew, then English, repeated twice:

Sh'ma Israel... Hear, Israel...

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 152

Reading 1 [DT 6:2-6](#)

Moses spoke to the people, saying:

"Fear the LORD, your God,
and keep, throughout the days of your lives,
all his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you,
and thus have long life.
Hear then, Israel, and be careful to observe them,
that you may grow and prosper the more,
in keeping with the promise of the LORD, the God of your fathers,
to give you a land flowing with milk and honey.

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!
Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God,
with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your strength.
Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today."

Responsorial Psalm [PS 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51](#)

R. (2) **I love you, Lord, my strength.**

I love you, O LORD, my strength,
O LORD, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.

R. **I love you, Lord, my strength.**

My God, my rock of refuge,
my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold!

Praised be the LORD, I exclaim,
and I am safe from my enemies.

R. **I love you, Lord, my strength.**

The LORD lives! And blessed be my rock!
Extolled be God my savior.

You who gave great victories to your king
and showed kindness to your anointed.

R. **I love you, Lord, my strength.**

Reading 2 [HEB 7:23-28](#)

Brothers and sisters:

The levitical priests were many
because they were prevented by death from remaining in office,
but Jesus, because he remains forever,
has a priesthood that does not pass away.
Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him,
since he lives forever to make intercession for them.

It was fitting that we should have such a high priest:
 holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners,
 higher than the heavens.
 He has no need, as did the high priests,
 to offer sacrifice day after day,
 first for his own sins and then for those of the people;
 he did that once for all when he offered himself.
 For the law appoints men subject to weakness to be high priests,
 but the word of the oath, which was taken after the law,
 appoints a son,
 who has been made perfect forever.

Alleluia[JN 14:23](#)

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Whoever loves me will keep my word, says the Lord;
 and my father will love him and we will come to him.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel[MK 12:28B-34](#)

One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him,
 "Which is the first of all the commandments?"
 Jesus replied, "The first is this:
Hear, O Israel!
The Lord our God is Lord alone!
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul,
with all your mind,
and with all your strength.
 The second is this:
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
 There is no other commandment greater than these."
 The scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher.
 You are right in saying,
 'He is One and there is no other than he.'
 And 'to love him with all your heart,
 with all your understanding,
 with all your strength,
 and to love your neighbor as yourself'
 is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."
 And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding,
 he said to him,
 "You are not far from the kingdom of God."
 And no one dared to ask him any more questions.