

Homily: Thirty-First Sunday of Ordinary Time  
(Mk 12:28b-34)

Have you ever found yourself in a conversation with a person who isn't Catholic, who maybe isn't even Christian – a friend or relative, a coworker or fellow student, someone on the T – and the talk turns to religion? And sooner or later you say, “yes, I'm a Catholic,” and then the conversation turns to Catholic things – what the Church teaches or what we practice – and then you get the response: “you *really* believe that?” or “you actually *do* that?” It could be something utterly unremarkable like believing the Blessed Mother is praying for us or eating fish on Fridays during Lent, but still you suddenly find yourself in the role of local Catholic expert, explaining an aspect of what it means to be Catholic. Now maybe you leave the conversation consoled, having had the opportunity to defend the Faith, as it were, having stood up bravely with a short explanation about how many Hail Marys go into a rosary, or maybe you leave the conversation with a question – even a doubt – in your mind, because you're not convinced that Church you see today is exactly the Church as it ought to be. Either way is not all bad, for it proves your faith is still alive: you're still asking questions, you're still hoping for an answer.

I raise this question, because I think in the Gospel we hear today, we get a chance to look in on just such a conversation, and perhaps many of us here are asking the same question of God we get asked: “you actually *do* that?” “How is that possible?” The question the scribe is asking Jesus is basically the one each one of us asks, or we wouldn't be here right now: “what do I need to do to be a good person? What do I need to do to be a faithful person?” And the response Jesus makes to the scribe, and which he

makes to each one of us is: love God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength – and if that’s not enough – love your neighbor as yourself.

*How* can we do that? How is that possible?

For the Jews of Jesus’ time – as for the Jews of today – that commandment to love God and love neighbor stood at the very foundation of their faith. It defined what it meant to be a Jew. It was what they were to remind themselves of when they got up in the morning and when they went to bed at night. It was what they were to teach their children. At the root of faith is God’s voice calling them to be a people: “Hear, O Israel!” And then a command about what it means to listen to God: love God and love the people you live with no less than you love yourself. Nothing else that you can possibly think of means more to God than (trying) to do those things. That is what it meant to be a Jew then; that is what it means to be a Jew now; and that is what it means to be member of the New Israel, the Church. It is a task *maybe* a lifetime will manage to get down right.

But how do we do it? How is it possible to love God so much who most often seems so far away? How do we *begin* to love someone else as much as we love ourselves? Or for some of us, how do we love ourselves enough, so that we are even able to give love to someone else? What two millennia of Christian theology has yet to work out, I won’t pretend to give the final word on. And as much as I would like to speak from a great store of personal experience, I must confess I’m still learning what it means to love God and my neighbor and even myself. I suppose if I didn’t say something, though, you might leave disappointed, so I will say this:

If something has changed from the time the scribe had his conversation with Jesus and the time today – when we might have the same talk with Jesus in prayer – it is this: we as Christians see that loving God is not just loving the Holy One of Israel as the Jews do, but it is also loving Christ, who is God living with us, a human being like us. And for those who believe, that makes all the difference. It means that if you want to know how you can love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength, then you need go no further than loving your neighbor – the people you live with and among – as fully as you are able. To love another person in the light of Christian faith is not simply to hold that person in reverence and affection (though this is a good thing!), but it is to love God – to worship God – in and through the love you have for that person.

And if you want to know how you can love your neighbor as yourself, then try – and keep trying – to love God in your life, for in the end, I believe, it is only God who teaches us how to love. Like God, love is a mysterious thing: caring for a person without expecting anything in return, sacrificing what you desire so that someone else may prosper and grow, accepting someone else's sacrifice as a gift to be shared, holding onto your own freedom even when you are serving others. These are things that only God, with much time and patience, can teach us. This is what Jesus came to show us in his life, death and resurrection. They are lessons learned through a lifetime, with God asking of us not perfection but only that we strive to learn from our mistakes and try yet again.

In this Eucharist, let us be open to what Christ wants to teach us, and let us learn from one another what it means to be a community united by love.