

**Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A), October 23, 2011****Ex 22:20-26; 1 Thes 1:5c-10; Mt 22:34-40*****Loving God***

In today's Gospel Jesus tells us that the "whole law and the prophets" depend on the commands to love God "with all your heart, with all your soul and all your mind" and "your neighbor as yourself." We Christians here in the US today have a pretty good understanding of what loving our neighbor as ourselves means, even if we don't always do it. So it might be useful to reflect on what it could mean to love God.

In the gospel Jesus speaks as a Jewish teacher. The Pharisees ask him which commandment is the greatest. He replies with a central text of the Hebrew bible. "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength." This is call to a very deep form of love!

What can a commandment to love God with all our hearts possibly mean? That it should be a command seems puzzling. Love is spontaneous and free. How can it be commanded? God does not really need our service. God is also very much a mystery, and it is difficult to love what we do not know. What can a command to love of God possibly mean?

I have been helped with this by the Jesuit biblical scholar John Donahue. Donahue suggests that we might be helped by reflecting on the deep human love of an elderly couple who have been married for 50 or 60 years and who remain very much in love with each other. In the evening they are often content to sit quietly in each other's presence. Their love doesn't require saying anything, or doing anything. The saying and doing have already been done. The couple has deep trust in the reality of the love they share. Behind their silent presence with each other lie decades of knowledge, care, and trials borne together. Their silent sitting with each other is an act of gratitude for years of mutual commitment.

Our love for God could be like this. It can be expressed by quietly sitting and quietly realizing how God has been a partner in every aspect of life. This kind of love for God is gratitude and remembrance for what God has done, not a project we do for God. Growing in this grateful love for God calls for remembering all that God has done for us. How to do this?

The words of the poet Mary Oliver might help us. Mary Oliver has a deep sense of how God's love for us is present everywhere, both in the gift of the created world and in the wonders of our relationships with each other. She invites us to stop and really pay attention to the gifts around us. Listen to Oliver's poem called "Praying", which starts by silently considering the beauty of nature and ends hearing the voice of God: Here's the poem:

It doesn't have to be  
 the blue iris, it could be  
 weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
 small stones; just  
 pay attention, then patch  
 a few words together and don't try  
 to make them elaborate, this isn't  
 a contest but the doorway  
 into thanks, and a silence in which  
 another voice may speak.

Pay attention! Pay attention to the gift of a blue iris, also to the weeds in a vacant lot! Pay attention to the gifts of friendship and human love that have come into one's life. Pay attention also to the struggles and losses we face. Pay attention to the way Jesus loved and what Jesus's love tells us about the way God loves us. Jesus didn't just love those of us who are like Oliver's blue iris; Jesus seems especially to have loved those of us who are a bit like weeds: sinners and traitors. He loved the unlovable. He loved his enemies.

Deep within both the gifts and struggles of our lives, Jesus tells us God is there, loving us. If we pay attention to what is really going on, Oliver tells that perhaps "another voice may

“speak,” the quiet voice of God saying “I love you.” If we stop and listen, perhaps we will be led to turn to God and become able to say “I love you too.” We don’t need many words to express this love for God. Like the loving elderly couple, we can just sit silently in a spirit of gratitude. God will know what we mean.

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