

**30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 26, 2008
4 P.M. Liturgy**

How often have you heard it said that you should never discuss politics or religion in polite company? The full wisdom suggests that discussions about religion or politics only lead to big arguments, sometimes fist fights, and, in the end, nothing much ever gets resolved. Jesus seems never to have heeded the warning. But he is always very careful.

Last week's gospel had Pharisees and followers of Herod trying to get Jesus to comment on the burning political issue of his day, the Roman taxation of Israel. He did not take the bait and give a yes or no answer. Today's gospel tells us that Jesus just silenced the Sadducees in another pointed argument, so the Pharisees go into conference to test Jesus again. This time they will try to trip him up not on politics but on one of Jesus' favorite topics, religion. Or more specifically, faith in God's kingdom.

You might think this would be an easy test for Jesus. After all he as a leading religious figure by this time in his public ministry. He spoke about religion frequently. But we notice that he does not take the bait this time either.

The Pharisees, experts in the law, the Jewish law that governed all Israel at the time, trot out the books of the law. Now historians tell us that the

Jews of that time had about 900 specific laws that had to be followed in order to maintain a proper relationship with God. These laws concerned what you wore, what you ate, how you washed, how and when you prayed, and on and on. (Sounds a bit like my own Catholic upbringing.) They ask Jesus to pick one of these laws and rank it as the most important.

Lest this seem so foreign to us, here is a copy of our law book. This is the Code of Canon Law that summarizes how we Catholics govern ourselves in a proper relationship with God and the church. You think 900 laws is heavy? This book runs 668 pages (and that's without footnotes or commentary). Religious people do love laws.

Now don't get me wrong, laws are important—in society and in religion. Even Jesus says at another place in the gospels, “not one jot or tittle of the Law will be destroyed.” Laws are important. I think of that marvelous line from Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, where Thomas More has an argument with Will Roper about the place of law and how laws, once destroyed, would even allow the Devil to roam freely in England. Will Roper says he would cut down all the laws to get at the Devil. More disagrees strongly and says even the Devil needs the benefits of law—for our own sake if not the Devils. Thomas says to Will: “Yes, I'd give the Devil himself the benefit of law *for my own safety's sake.*”

Law is important, but it is not the heart of any relationship. Certainly not relationships with each other; and even more certainly, law will never be at the heart of a relationship with God. So Jesus, once again, will not answer the question simplistically. Rather he chooses to go to the heart of the matter. He refers to the spirit behind all religious law. Jesus references all the prophets of Israel and all the laws ever written in Israel and says: they all mean only one thing. Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and mind, and soul. And love your neighbor as yourself. He must have stunned his original Pharisaic audience with his simplicity and his directness.

Inside each man's or woman's heart lies the key to God's kingdom. No law will ever articulate it clearer.

A few weeks ago, in a moment of obvious craziness on my part, I actually sang a song for the children at the family liturgy. It was an old Peter, Paul & Mary song called simply: "Inside." My theme for the children was the same as it is today for you. The chorus (which the children, by the way, sang along with me) goes like this.

"Inside, inside that's the most important part

Inside, inside that's the place you've got to start

Inside, inside that's where you find the heart of the matter."

It is, finally, all about love—not law. And I leave you with a wise caution and counsel from our friend and patron St. Ignatius of Loyola. He writes with equal simplicity toward the end of his *Spiritual Exercises* to remember that: Love always manifests itself more in deeds than in words.

“You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these.”

Could it be that simple?