

Timothy J. Grassi

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) 2020

There is a story about a young woman who was in great distress because she had lost a sense of God in her life. She complained to her elderly grandmother, “Why doesn’t God let me feel His presence? If only I could feel Him and know that He has touched me.” Her grandmother said, “Pray to God, right now. Close your eyes and pray to Him. Ask Him to put out his hand and touch you.” The girl closed her eyes and prayed fervently. Then she felt a hand on her hand. “He touched me. He touched me,” she cried out. Then she said, “You know, his hand felt just like your hand.” “Of course it was my hand,” her grandmother said. “That’s how God works. He takes the hand that is nearest and uses that.”

When we hear or speak of love, we often think of romance, joy, and warm feelings. As a matter of fact, the Gospel is like an invitation to joy because it is an invitation to love. The law of love is also the law of joy. St. Thomas Aquinas says that the virtue of joy is not distinct from charity or love, but a certain act and effect of it. So, our joy is dependent upon our union with God. Let me try to explain what I mean. We have been hearing in the Gospels over the last 2 or 3 weeks about a day in the life of Jesus. He had to contend with groups of religious leaders trying to trip Him up. First came the chief priests and scribes, then some Pharisees, followed by some Sadducees, followed by even more Pharisees. And all the while Jesus was trying to preach to the people, including the blind and the lame who had gathered around Him. And today’s Gospel shows, once again, that all these dignitaries are only trying to trap Him instead of asking Him how they could better care for the people surrounding Him. Their very actions showed how blind they were to what it really meant to love God or their neighbor.

So, when the scholar of the law tests Jesus by asking the question about the greatest commandment, Jesus says “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind;.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The message is that this is what we have to do. We must direct our entire being to God, serve our neighbors, open ourselves to the Lord and forget about ourselves. We have to put aside our longing for ease and comfort, our vanity and our pride. We often fall to the delusion that we will be happier once we possess a sufficient amount of things, or once we achieve popularity, or once we are more admired, but the reality is that our only need is to have a heart in love. No love can ever fill our heart like the love of God. It is what our hearts were made for.

So, this is why Jesus identifies this as the first and greatest commandment. All other love flows from and has its meaning in this love of God. This is why in the first letter of St. John we hear that we really can't love God whom we do not see if we do not love our neighbor whom we do see. And this is where the second commandment that Jesus puts before us comes into play. In other words, the more we love God and make an effort to love Him, the more we will love our neighbor; and similarly, the more we love our neighbor and the more we make an effort to love our neighbor, the more we will be loving God. The two are so integrally linked together that to try to separate them will result in something that is phony. For that matter, we can only love God to the extent that we love the person we love the least. What that means is that love entails suffering, otherwise the crucifix is meaningless, because the crucifix says "I love the man who nailed me to this cross."

So, the crucifix is the perfect image of love and the perfect invitation to love. This is why we like the stories about people who risk their lives for the life of another. They are responding to the invitation of the crucifix. Loving people and saving them entails suffering. Think of it in the simplest things. It's painful to be patient when a loved one shouts at us. It's painful to be forgiving like the father of the prodigal son, and welcome back home a wayward child. It's painful to be humble, like the son in the same parable, and admit that we were wrong. I'd like to see marriage licenses with the same thing that certain food products have, namely a stamp that says, "This product may be harmful to your health," because I think marriage licenses should be stamped with the words, "Love entails suffering." There is something very fulfilling when we suffer in and for love. Actually, we should rejoice when we feel the suffering involved in love. We should rejoice when we feel the pain of having to be patient with the same person about the same thing, day in and day out. We should rejoice when we feel the pain of having to swallow our pride when passed up for an honor or promotion. The reason is, when we suffer because of love, we can rejoice because we know that God is using us. And this brings us back to that young woman who had lost the sense of God in her life and her elderly grandmother taught her, how God works. "He takes the hand that is nearest and uses that." The two greatest commandments are a challenge and an invitation to let Him use your hand!