

## 30<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (October 29, 2023)

The Pharisees ask Jesus ‘which commandment in the law is the greatest?’, and he answers in words we have all heard so many times: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind...and the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” God is the first and foremost focus of our love, and then our neighbor. Jesus has told us what he means by ‘neighbor’ in his parable of the Good Samaritan—‘neighbor’ is anyone in need. We then realize that every single one of us, every person is in need in one way or another: spiritually, emotionally, socially or perhaps materially as well. All of which leads inevitably to the conclusion that, in a very real way, every person is our neighbor—whether they live next door, down the road, or halfway around the world.

So does this mean that Jesus’ call to love our neighbor as ourselves is hopelessly idealistic? Does he require us to provide specific, individual assistance to every one of the seven-plus billion people now living on this earth? Of course not. But we know that love—the love Jesus calls us to live—is so much more than warm feelings and the joy of being with those you feel close to. It may involve such things, but they are not the essence of love. St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, said that ‘love is shown more by deeds than by words’. It involves making the gift of ourselves in some way—perhaps materially or being present to another or praying for a particular person in a specifically difficult circumstance. One author put it well in saying that ‘loving our neighbor means willing [or desiring] his or her ultimate good...eternal salvation.’

Lots of nice words, right? But do they have any meaning or relevance in the muck and chaos of 21st-century life? They certainly do. Consider the current war between Israel and her enemies in Gaza. In a way, it is simply the latest chapter in the conflict in that region ever since Israel was established as a nation in 1948 to provide a home for the Jewish people after Nazi Germany tried to destroy that people. On October 7 the Hamas terrorist group launched missiles into Israel which killed over 1000 innocent people. Israel is now striking back against Hamas strongholds in Gaza and is preparing its army to move in as well.

In the midst of all this violence and all the accusations going back and forth, in the midst of the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia and other conflicts around the world, is it hopelessly or even ridiculously naive to even talk about ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’? Pope Francis and many other religious and world leaders have rightly condemned the deadly attacks against the innocent in all such circumstances. We hate, we condemn the evil that is being done by Hamas and other perpetrators of violence whose goals are death and destruction. And God certainly condemns all such sins against human life and dignity; sacred scripture is very clear about that.

But does God love those Hamas terrorists? Does God love Vladimir Putin and those carrying out his orders to brutalize the innocent people of Ukraine? Yes, he does...because ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8). Though God surely rejects and condemns the evil they are doing, he loves those individuals because they are made in his image and likeness just like we are. God desires their salvation just as much as he desires our salvation: “God..wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Because God truly loves these individuals and because he truly condemns and rejects the evil they are doing, he desires their conversion—their turning away from the evil they are doing—for the sake of their eternal salvation.

And that is where we come back into the picture. Our call to love those who do evil things like attacking innocent people does not mean excusing or justifying or ignoring their evil. Instead, it means

that we desire for them what God desires for them—their salvation. And so we pray for them. Love is doing; it is action—and prayer is a very powerful action that we can all undertake. The world may laugh at us, ridicule us, or ignore us, but so what? We seek what God seeks; we love as God loves, and so we pray—pray for the conversion of those who commit sin and evil against others, just as we continue to pray for ourselves and our own loved ones for the ongoing conversion we each need. We may not be attacking innocent Israelis, Palestinians or Ukrainians, but every single one of us is still a work in progress to one degree or another. We are each in need of God’s help to continue to grow in holiness and love.

I recently came across a brief reflection on this gospel call to love; it’s by Bishop Barron of Winona/Rochester (our neighbor to the north). He once visited the southern California ranch used by Ronald Reagan and his wife while he served as president. He was impressed with the beauty of the area, but the ranch house itself was quite simple, especially the bedroom which he noted was very small and rather rough-looking. Barron remarked to a tour guide that he thought Mrs. Reagan, given her refined tastes, probably didn’t like the place all that much. The guide smiled and said “no, on the contrary. She loved it because he loved it, and she loved him.”

The bishop goes on: “if we truly love God, then we will love everyone God loves, even those who are, for us, rather unlovable. Had she not fallen in love with Ronald Reagan, Nancy most likely wouldn’t have cared for the rustic ranch, but she did fall in love with him and he loved the ranch--so she loved it too. If we haven’t fallen in love with God, we will probably find a lot of people not to our liking. But if we do love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, we will love those whom he loves--which means everyone.”

Is love easy? Not always, and sometimes it can downright hard. But love is never impossible—because it’s what God wants from us and for others, and God does not demand the impossible. Love wants the best for others, and the ultimate best is eternal salvation. We can love those who do awful, hateful, evil things by praying for them...because God desires their salvation as much as he does for us. And so he calls us to pray for them. Let’s not disappoint him.