

# 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 22:20-26
<i>Response</i>	I love you, Lord, my strength.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 1:5C-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Whoever loves me will keep my word, says the Lord, and my Father will love him and we will come to him.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 22:34-40

Today, on the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year A, we are now turning to one of Jesus' most famous teachings in the Gospel; his teaching on the two greatest commandments in Scripture. This is a really important teaching for the history of the Church because in it Jesus gives us the essence of the law, the essence of what it means to follow the will of God. He kind of boils it all down to the most important points. And so we want to ask what did he mean when he answered this question? What would he have been understood to have meant in his first century Jewish setting? And then what does he mean today for us as well? So in Matthew 22:34-40, this is what happens:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sad'ducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."<sup>1</sup>

Pause there. Unlike some of the previous Gospels we've had in previous weeks, this is a very short text. It is a very short Gospel. But there's a lot going on here

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

and there's a lot to unpack. So let's walk through it together. First of all, the setting. When it says that a lawyer came up to Jesus and asked him a question — in the Revised Standard Version translation — what that really means is a doctor of the law. The word law, *nómos* in Greek, is a Greek translation of the Hebrew expression *torah*, which simply refers to the law of God, the law of Israel, and was a kind of shorthand way for talking about the Scriptures, the Jewish Torah, especially the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Those were, for Jews, the Torah, the heart of the Jewish Scriptures. You can even say that the five books of Moses were for the Jewish people what the four Gospels are for Christians. They are the foundation of the rest of the Scriptures. They are the foundation of the rest of the Old Testament, just like the Gospels are the foundation of the New Testament.

So what this lawyer is basically asking him is, what's the greatest commandment in the Pentateuch, in the five books of Moses? And if you have read the first five books of the Bible, you know they are long, they are detailed, and there are a lot of laws and a lot of commandments in them. In fact, by traditional Jewish counting, Moses gives the people of Israel in the first five books 613 laws. And basically what this lawyer, this doctor of the law, this biblical scholar — that is basically what he was, a Jewish biblical scholar — is asking Jesus is which one of the 613 is the most important? What's the greatest of all the laws? Now if I were to ask you what is the first commandment, which can mean both the first in numbering but also the first in greatness, you might be inclined to say the first of the Ten Commandments. So Jesus could have legitimately answered the guys question by going back to the Decalogue, the 10 words of God, the Ten Commandments of Moses in Exodus 20. He could have said to this Jewish scholar that the first commandment is of course the first commandment: “I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before me.” The prohibition against idolatry. But Jesus doesn't do that, he doesn't go to the negative prohibition that Moses gives to Israel in the Ten Commandments. Instead he goes to the positive law from Moses in the book of Deuteronomy 6:4-6. So if you go back to Deuteronomy 6:4-6, this passage is called, in Jewish tradition, the Shema. The Hebrew word *Shema* means hear or listen. And they call this passage the Shema from the very first Hebrew word, because in Deuteronomy 6:4 it says

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

And it goes on to say:

And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Wow! That's pretty important. So the verses in Deuteronomy 6:4-6, "you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might," that verse, the Shema, became for Jews a kind of creed. They would actually recite it, following the words of Moses here, when they rose in the morning, when they went about (so they would do it at midday), and then also when they would lie down (so they would do it in the evening). And the custom developed of reciting the Shema multiple times a day. As far as we can tell, three times a day was the norm: morning, noon and evening. Morning, noon and evening you would recite these words over and over again: "Hear O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." So what Jesus is doing here, when he answers the Hebrew scholars question, is on the one hand he's kind of doing something unexpected. He is not pointing to the first of the Commandments. On the other hand, he is doing something really commonplace by pointing to the most well-known verses of the Bible for any Jew in the first century A.D. So the Shema for Jews was the equivalent of the Our Father for Catholics.

A lot of Catholics aren't familiar with chapter and verses in the Bible. And sometimes our non-Catholic brothers and sisters can give us a hard time with that, because they will frequently memorize verses and memorize the chapter and verse where certain key passages are located, and Catholics can feel a little intimidated. But I always try to tell Catholic students of mine, if anyone says to you, well do you know the Bible chapter and verse, you should always say well yes, I know

Matthew 6:9-13. Let me recite it for you: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name... That passage from Scripture is well known to Christians because traditionally it actually would also be recited three times a day. That was a standard Catholic thing for a long time. Not just a long time, but since the first century. In the Didache, it is an ancient Christian writing from the 1st century A.D., it said pray the Our Father three times a day; morning, noon, and evening as a kind of fulfillment of the Jewish praying of the Shema. That is kind of a long side note, but it is important to see that Jesus is taking this prayer which he himself would have recited three times a day as a faithful Jew — Mary and Joseph, they would've prayed the Shema over and over again — he takes this creed of the Jewish people and he says this is the greatest commandment. You are to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, which would mean your will, with all of your soul, which is the image of your life — the *nephesh* is the soul in the Old Testament, it is a Hebrew word for life — and with all of your mind, Jesus says as well, in other words with your intellect. So it's a kind of composite but complete picture of the human person. In other words, you will love God with all that you have and with all that you are.

Now before we go to the second commandment, which Jesus will say is you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I think it's actually important to point out one more parallel from Jewish tradition. I found this really helpful for sharing with people about the meaning of the text. So there is a tradition in the collection of ancient Jewish beliefs and traditions, known as the Babylonian Talmud. This comes from around the 3rd to 5th century A.D. There is a tradition of a very famous rabbi who lived a little after the time of Jesus called Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Akiva was martyred by the Romans. He was actually skinned alive by the Romans. The story of his martyrdom gives us a little bit of an insight into the importance of the Shema for the Jewish people, as well as into Jesus' interpretation here. So in the Babylonian Talmud — I have a copy right here — he gives this tradition. It says:

When Rabbi Akiba was taken out for execution, it was the hour of the recital of the Shema',

In other words, it was the time for prayer, the time for reciting I am the LORD your God; you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your might. And it says:

and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingdom of heaven.

Which means he was reciting the prayer.

His disciples said to him, "Our teacher, even to this point?"

In other words, "are you still going to be reciting the Shema?"

He said to them, "All my days I have been troubled by this verse: 'With all your soul', [which I interpret,] 'even if he takes your soul'. I said, 'When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this verse'? Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it?" So he prolonged the word echad [= 'one'] until he expired while saying it.<sup>2</sup>

That is a powerful story. What does it show? Well it says that Rabbi Akiva basically was saying "I never really understood what it meant to love God with all your soul until this moment, until I give my very life for the love of God." So as he's reciting this prayer, when he gets to the word the LORD is your God, the LORD is one, he dies and gives his life for God. So in that context I hope you can see why Jesus might've said that loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul mind, and strength was the most important. It's about a total gift of self to God, even unto death, which is what Jesus himself is going to do, obviously, on the cross.

But then Jesus gives us a second commandment as well. He says "there is a second commandment that's like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Sometimes when I ask students where did Jesus get the two greatest commandments, a lot of times they will assume that he made them up, like this is the new covenant. Whereas the old covenant was focused on judgment and justice, the new covenant is focused on love. You will frequently see that kind of dichotomy in Christian minds. The Old Testament focused on law and the New Testament focused on love. But the reality is that these two greatest

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berakoth 61b

commandments, Jesus is getting straight from the Old Testament. So the first one is from Deuteronomy 6:4-6, but the second one is from the book of Leviticus. So if you go back to Leviticus 19 — Leviticus is a lot less familiar to most Christians because it has so many specific laws of sacrifice and cult and Jewish rituals — in Leviticus 19:18 we read these words:

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself...

So there it goes, Jesus gets the law of love of neighbor from the Old Testament, and he says “on these two laws [love of God and love of neighbor] depend [or literally in the Greek, hang] the law and the prophets.” Well what does that mean? Well the law and the prophets was another Jewish expression for the Scriptures. So the law was the first five books of the Old Testament, and the prophets was a way of referring to the second major portion of the Old Testament. This was actually a combination of what we call historical books, as well as the works of the prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and so on and so forth. So what Jesus is, in essence, saying is all of the Bible, all of the Scriptures, hang on two key commandments. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. They sum up the essence of the Jewish Scriptures.

Now, what's fascinating about this for us to understand Jesus's words, is that in essence by saying on these two laws hang all the law and the prophets, Jesus not only gets the whole Bible in, he also takes us back to the Ten Commandments themselves. So he doesn't exclude the Ten Commandments. If you look at the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus in Chapter 20, you can actually divide them up into laws that have to do with love of God and laws that have to do with love of neighbor. So most of us remember that from the book of Exodus, God inscribed the Ten Commandments not on one but on two tablets. And traditionally those two tablets are associated with two kinds of laws. The first three Commandments, the commandment against idolatry (number one), the commandment against blasphemy (number two), and the commandment against breaking the Sabbath (number three); those are all commandments that express our love for God. That is the first tablet. But the second tablet with commandments like number four: honor your father and mother, or number five: you shall not kill, number six: you shall not commit adultery, number seven: you shall not steal, number eight: you shall not

bear false witness, and then the last two commandments against coveting things that belong to your neighbor; those are all about love of neighbor.

So what Jesus has basically done is taken the the negative prohibitions that you find on the two tablets of the Decalogue and he's flipped them and summed them up in positive commands. Namely, not only what you should avoid, but what you should actually do. You need to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and in that way you will fulfill the first tablet of the Decalogue; and then you also need to love your neighbor as yourself, and in that way you will fulfill the second tablet of the Decalogue. And in that way he sums up the whole Bible, "on these hang all the law and the prophets." So you can imagine, if you were there in the audience of Jesus, if you were say that lawyer, the biblical scholar who was asking that, that is a very impressive answer to the question. Jesus really is distilling the essence of Jewish Scripture without abandoning anything from it.

Okay, with that in mind then, what do we make of the first reading for today's Mass? If you go back, you might have expected the reading from the Old Testament to be maybe the Ten Commandments, or maybe the Shema, and those would have been appropriate choices. In this case, the Church actually picked a less familiar text to us, but a really important text to us, that focuses on love of neighbor. It's from the book of Exodus 22:21-26. This is part of what is called the book of the covenant in Exodus. It's an important part of the Scriptures where God begins to give Israel laws that deal with how they are to treat one another. And in Exodus 22:21 we read these words:

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him,  
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.  
You shall not afflict any widow or orphan.  
If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me,  
I will surely hear their cry;  
and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword,  
and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor,  
you shall not be to him as a creditor,  
and you shall not exact interest from him.

If ever you take your neighbor's garment in pledge,  
you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down;  
for that is his only covering, it is his mantle for his body;  
in what else shall he sleep?  
And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

What is this text and why is it chosen here? Well this is a classic law from the Old Testament about how we treat our most vulnerable neighbors: the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. The stranger, what does that mean? Well that isn't just like when your momma told you "don't talk to strangers," like people you don't know. Stranger there is a technical term for a foreigner, for an immigrant, for a sojourner — you will sometimes see it translated — someone who is from a foreign land, but who is dwelling in the land of Israel. And because they have immigrated to the land of Israel, they are vulnerable. They don't have any family network. They don't know anyone. They are at the whims of the Israelites, the people of Israel, with regard to getting food, clothing and shelter. So what the Lord is doing here when he gives Israel its laws, is he is telling them that you cannot oppress or wrong a stranger who is in your midst. The NAB actually has this translated as an alien, which is where we get the terminology of illegal or legal aliens. It means someone who is immigrating from another country. So the first law is you shall not oppress or afflict them.

The second category is widows and orphans. Why can't they be afflicted? Well it is similar to the sojourner or to the alien. They are helpless. A widow or an orphan in ancient society would not have a father figure to protect them from robbers, or from exploitation, or from abuse, whether it be physical or otherwise. So widows and orphans were particularly vulnerable members of society, and God is commanding the Israelites, you cannot afflict them. Don't do them harm. And if you do them harm and they cry out to me, I am going to hear it. The same thing with the poor. God here is giving a law that says if someone is going to pay a debt by giving you their clothes because that's all they own, obviously that means that person is extremely poor. So God here is commanding the Israelites that if you are going to take someone's garment, you have to restore it to them by sundown because that's all they have with which to clothe themselves. Now obviously, practically speaking, that wouldn't make a lot of sense to take a garment as a down payment for a loan when you have to give it back that night. So essentially what



the Lord is really doing here is prohibiting any kind of exploitation of those who are the poorest of the poor, who were extremely destitute, who don't have a penny to their name and only have their clothing. You are not to take their clothing from them and despoil them of the very last thing that they possess. So this whole list here is interesting because the Church is giving it to us because it gives us the foundation for what will later develop into the Church's social doctrine, into the Church's social teaching, on how we are to express the love of neighbor in society, and in particular with reference to the most vulnerable members of society: the poor, the widow, the orphan and the immigrant.

In fact, if you look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1868, it actually alludes to this passage from Exodus 22 as an example of "sins that cry out to heaven;" in other words, particularly grievous sins that bring down punishment from God. And those particularly grievous sins among them are any kind of persecution or harm being done to widows, orphans and immigrants. It is a very serious teaching and a foundation for the Church's social doctrine. So the first reading for today in the Old Testament deals with love of neighbor, and interestingly the Responsorial Psalm for this week, which is Psalm 18, is about love of God. So if you look at the Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 18, the first verse there is very clear:

I love thee, O LORD, my strength.  
The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer,  
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge...

So this is a really brilliant strategy on the part of the lectionary, to complement the Gospel reading she gives us laws from the book of Exodus that show love of neighbor and then a Psalm that is all about the love of God. That provides us a bridge from the Old to the New Testaments. So I would like to close now with just a short reflection from the living tradition. This is St. Augustine's statement about the two greatest commandments that Jesus gives in Matthew 22. He makes very clear that it really is related to the Decalogue, it's related to the Ten Commandments, even though Jesus cites the Shema and the book of Leviticus, he really is boiling down for us the essence of the Ten Commandments. Augustine says:

As charity comprises the two commandments to which the Lord related the whole Law and the prophets... [Matt 22:39] so the Ten Commandments were themselves given on two tablets. Three were written on one tablet, and seven on the other.<sup>3</sup>

So why does that matter for us? Well I think it's important because if you look at Jesus' twofold commandment of love, it shows us that at the end of the day the essence of the Christian religion, the essence of the Christian faith, really is charity. It really is this twofold love: love of God and love of neighbor. But at the very same time, we can't escape from the positive commandments of the Decalogue, of the Ten Commandments themselves. If you look at, for example, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, part three of the catechism is on life in Christ. And how is it arranged? It's arranged according to the Ten Commandments. That's how the new Catechism of the Catholic Church is set up and that's how the older Catechism of the Council of Trent was set up. The Ten Commandments, in other words, are the foundations of Christian morality because the Ten Commandments, at the end of the day, are about the love of God and the love of neighbor.

So some Christians since the time of Martin Luther, for example, have grown up in non-Catholic circles where the tradition is that Jesus did away with the laws of the Old Testament in order to bring us the good news of the Gospel. That Jesus abolished the old law in order to bring in the new covenant. And while there is truth to the idea that Jesus fulfilled the old, the Decalogue, in particular, was never abandoned. Rather, Jesus summed it up in the twofold commandment of love of God and love of neighbor. So in the new covenant we are not free from the law of loving God and the law of loving neighbor. To the contrary, in the new covenant we are empowered through grace, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, to finally be able to keep the law, to be able to keep the Ten Commandments, to keep the love of God and to keep the love of neighbor, to really live that out in our daily lives. So I just throw that out. A lot of times Catholics don't realize that there are some Christians out there who will say "we don't have to keep the Ten Commandments anymore in the new covenant." Sometimes Catholics aren't familiar with the fact that some Christians, going back to Martin Luther, will say "we are not bound by the Ten Commandments. It doesn't matter what we do. If I commit adultery, or if I

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, Sermon 33.2.2

sin, or if I steal, I can be saved just by accepting Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior and believing in him.” And the reality is that that is clean contrary to Jesus’ own teachings in the Gospel. He is very clear that we do have to keep the Commandments when he sums up the Ten Commandments in the love of God and the love of neighbor. As St. Augustine says, the essence of the new law, the essence of the new covenant, is charity.