

30th Sunday.08

I think most of us are familiar with the word Torah. The Torah is another name for the first five Books of the Bible taken as a unity. There is also a Greek word, Pentateuch, used to describe this collection of five books. The Torah or Pentateuch contains 613 commandments or laws. In our Gospel today the Pharisees challenge Jesus to identify which of these is the most important. Jesus chooses the law or commandment which says that we must love God with all our heart and soul and mind. Then he adds a second law because he believes it is like this first one: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” These two different laws which Jesus has joined together come from different books. The law prescribing the love of God comes from the last book of the Torah, the book called Deuteronomy 6:4-5; the law prescribing love of neighbor comes from the third book of the Torah, Leviticus 19:18.

Was Jesus the first to join these two commandments together? The Episcopalian commentator Reginald Fuller says that he was not. The joining of the two can be found in an earlier Jewish work called “The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs.” But Fuller says that in this earlier Jewish work the two commandments were simply placed side by side by way of summarizing. Jesus,

however, understands their relationship differently. You cannot observe one without observing the other, he is telling us. They are indispensable to each other. In other words, Jesus is claiming that we cannot love God if we don't love our neighbor. I suppose we could paraphrase this claim by saying: If you love me, you must also love my friends. Or another paraphrase would be the familiar saying: any friend of his is also a friend of mine. The message then is clear: we have to love each other if we are to love God, or we cannot say we love God if we don't love each other. Think of a circle of people holding hands. If one person lets go of the hand of the person next to himself the circle is broken. So too with our love for God. If we let go of one person's hand in the circle of love, the circle, which represents God, ceases to exist for us. In short, when we deal with each other, we are dealing with God. Therefore we should treat each other with the greatest care and respect, with the greatest love we can muster up. Yes, that does apply to the way we deal with people in traffic, with the cashiers at Stop and Shop, with gas attendants, and even more so, obviously, with our friends, and, most of all, with our family. If we want to love God, we must love each other, every other.

Love in this context does not mean romance or warm feelings. No, love in this context means, as Paul teaches us, being kind,

peaceful, patient, understanding with others, etc. Moreover, this love also seeks out for special care those who need it most especially. And here we are not left blank spaces to fill in. No, the OT identifies those who most need our help, our love. They are the most defenseless in society: the widow (today we might include the single mother under this category); the orphan (today that would include the teen-agers who in one state (I think Nevada) can now be legally abandoned by their parents. Law-makers are now thinking of removing this new law because too many parents are making use of it. Think too of the thousands of street children in the poor countries of the world who quickly become victims of drugs and sex in order to survive.

Aliens, that is, strangers, are also especially in need of our care and protection, our love. This part of our first reading is especially applicable to us today as we face the question of illegal immigration. Those among us who want to be harsh with these people should realize that we are off base. This is not the kind of conduct God asks of us. He asks us to be compassionate. And when he spoke these words to the Jews, he could remind them that they too had once been aliens, strangers in a foreign land. Could not God say the same to us too? We are the children of immigrants. We wish that they had been treated compassionately. Let us

therefore treat today's immigrants compassionately, no matter how they came here. Let our laws become laws based on compassion, not hatred.

The final group singled out for special care are those who ask for loans. Yes, it is a text very close to our present situation: "If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner toward him by demanding interest from him. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body. What else has he to sleep in? If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate." If our bank and mortgage people had known this text, we would not be where we are today.

Someone has said that love in action is justice passed around. Maybe we could also say that love, when it is real, is compassion passed around. Brothers and Sisters, let us be compassionate with each other.