

## 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - Mark 12:28-34

What is more important than anything else? What would you value above every other thing? The Greek philosopher Plato thought that this was the most crucial question that anyone could ask. In fact, he set up an exercise to determine it.

He asked his students to picture their life as a big triangle and to place at the base of the triangle everything they valued, everything that they thought was important or noteworthy. Once that was done, Plato encouraged his students to raise those things that they valued to the apex of the triangle.

Now of course as they pushed things up, there was less and less space. And so things that were less important had to be left aside. Finally, when they reached the very top of the triangle, there was room for only one thing. That thing, Plato said, was the one most important thing.

Now I am quite sure that Jesus never knew of Plato's exercise. And it might seem that if he engaged in it, he would be unable to determine only one thing that is most important.

Because when the scribe in today's gospel asks him to pick **one** commandment, the most important one, the one that would sit at the top of the triangle, Jesus gives two commandments: that we should love God with all our heart, that we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

So, it seems that Jesus cannot narrow it down to one. But I would suggest to you that this would be an inaccurate understanding of Jesus' teaching.

The two commandments that are given are actually two components of one great commandment. Neither of those two commandments can function independently. Both are necessary. Each is one side of the same coin, together forming the one great commandment that is most important of all.

Since this is Jesus' central teaching, it would serve us well to reflect why we need both of these commandments, why neither can stand on its own.

Or to put this in other terms, why we cannot love our neighbor without loving God, and why we cannot love God without loving our neighbor.

Let us take the easier question first. Why is it impossible to love God without loving our neighbor? The answer is simple. Unless we are willing to love our neighbor, unless we're willing to give ourselves in service to those in need, unless we're willing to reach out in generosity and sacrifice, our love of God is hypocrisy.

If we are unable to love those around us, our prayer to God and our love of God is empty. If we are unwilling to give of ourselves to others, then our love of God is merely a matter of words or pious practices.

It might make us feel good, but it has no substance. It is not based in reality. The first letter of John tells us that those who say they love God but hate their brothers and sisters are liars.

Because how could they say that they love God who they cannot see and at the same time refuse to love their brothers and sisters who they do see? Love of God without love of neighbor is empty. It is hypocrisy.

How about the other way around? Why is love of neighbor without love of God deficient? Why do we need to love God if we are truly going to love our neighbor? This is a more difficult question, isn't it?

But the answer is this: love of God gives us the freedom to love others even when it is difficult, even when it is not all that practical. It is easy to love those who love us in return, but how can we love those who hurt us? How can we love our enemies?

We cannot love them for their sake, but we can love them for God's sake. We can love them because we love God. Why would you go to visit your grandmother with Alzheimers? She does not even know who you are. You do not go to visit her for her sake; you visit her for God's sake.

It is your love of God that motivates you to visit even when she cannot realize you are there. Why might you choose to recycle or conserve energy? It does not make that much difference. For the little bit that you are able to save or conserve, thousands are constantly upping their consumption. Yet you can choose this action of conserving, not for the earth's sake, but for God's sake, because it is the right thing to do.

The love of God gives us the ability to love others and to love the earth, even when that love is not reciprocated, even when it produces few results.

Our Jewish brother and sisters call this kind of loving a "mitzvah." It means "it is commanded." We do it because God expects it of us, and we love the God who loves us. This kind of loving is free. It is free from the limitations of strategies, the limitations of success. We love because God asks us to love, and that love is without any strings attached.

Jesus gives us a great commandment, but that great commandment has two essential parts: love of God and love of neighbor. Both are required. Love of God without love of neighbor is empty. Love of neighbor without love of God is limited to only love which is convenient and practical.

But these two loves together form one great commandment. They sit at the very pinnacle of the triangle of life. They are the most important thing. They are our entry into the Kingdom of God.

AMEN.