

**Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Oct. 23, 2005)**

The Greatest Commandment

They were still reeling from the set-back they had received earlier, these religious leaders. Remember what we heard last week? How they tried to trick him into making some kind of incriminating statement? They were not happy with him at all. He seemed to be undermining them and saying that sinners and prostitutes were better than they were and would get to heaven before they did. So they wanted to catch him. And up to this point they had not succeeded.

And now we hear them trying again. This time they send a lawyer, as the text says, to trip him up. Maybe they think that someone trained in the subtleties of the law would have more luck. The question he poses seems relatively harmless. After all we have heard this countless times and we can all answer the question. Which is the greatest of the commandments? We know, don't we?

Well, what we don't realize, of course, is that the Jewish people in Jesus' time – and even strict Orthodox Jews today – had 613 laws that they were obliged to observe, not just the ten commandments, which we also have. That's child's play in comparison. Every aspect of their lives was regulated by some law that told them how they were to act under every conceivable circumstance. And of course it was very difficult to remember all these rules and regulations. No wonder their scripture told them, "The just man falls seven times a day." Well, in order to try to help people cope with this plethora of prescriptions the rabbis tried to find some way to remember what the Lord required of them – because they were convinced that the Law represented what God wanted them to do. It was their way to God.

So the question posed to Jesus was not really all that unusual. What they wanted to see was this: was he clever enough to give an answer that adequately covered all their responsibilities without incurring the accusation of neglecting some point of the Law. Not really an easy thing to do.

But Jesus, being the person that Jesus was, was more than up to the task. Out of those 613 laws, he picks, not only the greatest, but the second greatest as well and tells them that these two formed the basis of the whole law and the prophets, that is, all of their sacred scripture. Love God above all and you neighbor as yourself. In a sense they needed to know nothing else.

So this law of love that Jesus enunciates is not something new. It had always existed. What is original in Jesus' way of putting it is the connection between love of God and love of neighbor. From now on, the measure of our love for God will be our love for our neighbor. And neighbor, of course, does not mean just our family or the person next door. It means everybody, as Jesus made abundantly clear with the parable of the Good Samaritan. It even means people we instinctively might not like. Mortal enemies should be treated the way the Samaritan treated his mortal enemy, the Jew who lay by the side of the road, beaten and stripped of his clothes by robbers.

Our first reading today gives us more information about our neighbor and people we should love as we love our very selves. We hear something that is repeated over and over again the pages of the Old Testament. Be sure you take care of widows, orphans, and aliens. If you don't, God says, then I'll treat you the same way you treat them, and we'll see how you like it. Why widows, orphans, and aliens? Because these were the most vulnerable people of their society. Orphans had no one to look after them. Widows had lost their only means of support, and it was hard for a woman in those days to have a decent way of making a livelihood on her own. Aliens had no rights whatsoever and depended completely on the kindness of the people around them. Along with the poor, of whom they formed a large part, they were the special objects of God's loving concern and God bids the people: have the same concern for them as I do.

Well. Who are the widows, orphans, and aliens today? Substitute women, children, and immigrants, both legal and illegal because God loves them all, and the application seems only too obvious.

I have had people ask me after I have said these kinds of things in a homily, "Why do you keep talking about the poor? We've heard enough, too much even. We're victims of compassion fatigue." Well, the problem is that it keeps coming up in our scriptures, so unless we want to ignore what

God is saying, we have to keep on repeating it. I suppose the only way to guarantee that we won't talk about it any more is to eliminate poverty, hunger, and homelessness. But since it's extremely unlikely that that is going to happen in the foreseeable future – or ever – then we have to keep insisting on it and just hope that people will be convinced that this is what God is calling us all to do.

With help of God's good grace, we will respond and show that indeed we do love God with our whole heart, with our whole mind, and with our whole soul, and that we do indeed love our neighbor as ourselves. And, believe me, dear friends, I say these things as much for myself as I say them for you. May God bless us all.