

Welcome, everyone, as we gather to celebrate this Eucharist. A special welcome to those who are visiting us here today – we are very happy to join with you in worship of our heavenly Father.

In today's gospel, the scribe asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is, and Jesus gives him two. Love God with all of your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. As Jesus' disciples, we therefore believe that loving God and loving our neighbor are linked. You cannot do one without the other. That statement, however, is a bit controversial, at least in one direction. Most people would accept that you cannot say you love God if you hate your neighbor, that seems straightforward. Loving God means loving those created in God's image, so saying that we love God while hating our neighbor would strike most people as untrue, a false love for God.

But what about saying that we cannot love our neighbor unless we love God? That would probably raise some objections. What about the atheist who doesn't even believe in God, but seems to be a loving person? Such a person would say that they do not love God, since they don't even believe He exists, and yet they would also say that they do love their neighbor. How could we argue that they don't?

My response to that would be that perhaps they love their neighbor to a degree, but not the way Jesus is talking about. Without a love for God, we must ask what such a love of neighbor is based on, what is its foundation? Do they love their neighbor because their neighbor is a good, decent person? That can change, good people can turn bad, and what happens to the love then? Do they love their neighbor because they are family? Well that's an accident of history and seems to suggest the love is based on genetics. Do they love their neighbor because they feel a sense of duty? Well, duty imposed by whom? Enforced by whom? And what about the murderer, the abuser, the hateful person: are they also loved as a neighbor? Based on what?

It is only by our love of God that we can love our neighbor the way Jesus intends and for the reason that includes everyone: because they are children of God. Jesus wants the love we have for each other to flow from our love for Him. There is a story that Fulton Sheen used to tell the story of a sister who took care of the sick. A man came in who was afflicted with leprosy, and he was covered with sores and open wounds that were very disturbing to see and touch, and especially smell. But the sister took care of the man without hesitation, touching his sores as she tended to him, all the time with a caring smile, not giving the slightest hint that the man reeked because of his affliction. A volunteer who watched her said to her

afterwards, “Sister, I wouldn’t do what you just did for a million dollars.” The sister looked at him and said, “Neither would I.”

It is only out of a deep love for God that we can love our neighbors - all of our neighbors. It is easy to love those who are kind to us, who love us in return. It is much more difficult to love those who seem intent on making themselves unlovable. But if we love God, we will be able to see through that ugliness and recognize a child of God, and love that neighbor as ourselves.

That is why our first duty is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength. No part of us is exempt from loving God. But that might seem like it is impossible. This is an obligation that cannot be filled by merely coming to Mass on a Sunday or saying a sporadic prayer now and again. This is an obligation that will occupy all our time, every moment of the day and with all our attention and energy. What we owe to God demands nothing less.

But we should try not to think of this as something burdensome that we must do for God. Instead, we should try to think of what He has done for us. He gave us all our faculties; He gave us the gift of life itself; He forgives our sins; if He withdraws his attention from us for a moment we wouldn’t even continue to exist. And He gives us the greatest gift of all; He freely gives us the life of His only Son

for our salvation. The scribe in today's gospel was close to the Kingdom of God because he understood these things. He understood what was due to God; he understood that in the face of such love our whole lives belong to God.

And if our whole lives belong to God, then we must submit everything to Him.

We talk about the separation of Church and State in this country as though that were one of the Ten Commandments. It is not. Certainly we give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and we give to God what belongs to God, as our Lord commanded. But that does not mean that those two spheres are completely distinct from each other, and where one goes, the other must retreat. Everything belongs to God, so there is no decision that we ever make for which we should purge our faith and separate God from our choices. On the day of our judgment, God will judge every choice that we made, from how we treated the cashier to how we drove our car to how we voted to how we gave up our life for a friend. We love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. That leaves nothing out.

So today, and Tuesday, and next month, and next year, may we seek to do God's will before anything else, to show Him that we love Him with all our being, as He calls us to do.