

Homily
7OrdA
February 23, 2020
St. Bernard Church
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LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

There are several strong statements about love in today's scripture readings. Two of them that stand out in my mind are the statement of Jesus to love your enemies and the command from the Book of Leviticus to love your neighbor as yourself. This morning I'm going to focus on what is called the Second greatest commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself.

We have interpreted this command in modern times to mean that we can't really love our neighbor unless we love ourselves. We've given the passage a psychological meaning, that we have to love ourselves before we can love anyone else.

That's not really what the commandment is all about. A better interpretation would be that we should treat our neighbors the way we would like to be treated, but even that understanding doesn't go deep enough.

To get at the real meaning of loving our neighbor as ourselves, we need to start by looking at the Old Testament.

So let's look at the first pair of neighbors in the Bible, Adam and Eve. You know the story. Adam is alone. God sends him some animals, but they aren't suitable neighbors. So God creates the woman, Eve, from Adam's rib.

Adam wakes up, and there is Eve. Upon seeing Eve, Adam exclaims, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." This is a beautiful, powerful statement about the relationship, the oneness, of the first neighbors.

This beautiful expression, "bone of my bone," whenever it might have been expressed in the presence of the Jewish people, would have reminded them of the deep oneness, the unity, of Adam and Eve.

In the 2nd Book of Samuel, Chapter 5, there is this passage: "All the tribes of Israel came to King David in Hebron and said, 'Here we are, your bone and your flesh.'"

In Chapter 19 of the same book is the following language: "David sent word to the priests Zadok and Abiathar: 'Say to the elders of Judah: Why should you be last to restore the king to his palace? You are my brothers, you are my bone

and flesh. Why should you be the last to restore the king? Also say to Amasa: Are you not my bone and flesh?"

The description by Jewish men of other Jewish men as "my bone and flesh" captures the very deep sense of unity that existed among the Jewish people. They saw themselves as linked together by their common Jewish faith in the same powerful way that Adam and Eve were connected to each other.

This sentiment is captured in Romans 9 when Saint Paul, formerly a devout Jew who had a dramatic conversion to Christianity, says in verse 3: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kin according to the flesh." He is saying that he would almost give up his salvation if it meant being separated from his Jewish brothers and sisters.

This idea of the Jewish people being so intimately and powerfully united by their faith is carried on into Christianity. One translation of Ephesians 5:30 goes like this:

"For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones."

The most famous passage in the New Testament about the relationship between Christians is in 1st Corinthians, Chapter 12, when St. Paul says that we, though many, are one body in Christ. He writes, in verses 25 and 26:

"There may be no division in the body, but the parts should have the same concern for one another. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy."

The way Christianity is supposed to work is that every Christian should contribute his or her gifts, talents and resources for the sake of building up the body of Christ, until, as St. Paul says in Ephesians, "we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God."

It's the Holy Spirit that is the source of all these gifts. And it is the Holy Spirit that connects them, that coordinates how they are combined for the maximum benefit.

There are 2 big obstacles to this beautiful plan.

The first is individualism, the temptation to just take care of ourselves and not really care about other people. We live in a highly individualistic society in modern America. Individualism, the "what's in it for me?" mentality, has led to massive increases in isolation, alienation, instability, anxiety and depression.

Our focus on individual freedom is suffocating us.

The second obstacle is that we just don't get the big picture of how Christianity is supposed to work. We're not really focused on identifying all the gifts that we have in our church communities and putting them all to work.

We are, as the Bible says, bone of Christ's bone and bone of one another's bone.

This means that we should love our neighbor as ourselves because our neighbor and our self are spiritually one person. Our neighbor is our self. That's what the commandment is all about.

I want to close with this beautiful description of how the Body of Christ is supposed to work from St. Cyril of Alexandria:

"All of us who have received one and the same Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit, are in a sense blended together with one another and with God. For if Christ, together with the Father's and his own Spirit, comes to dwell in each of us, though we are many, still the Spirit is one and undivided. He binds together the spirits of each and every one of us...and makes all appear as one in him. For just as the power of Christ's sacred flesh unites those in whom it dwells into one body, I think that in the same way the one and undivided Spirit of God, who dwells in all, leads all into spiritual unity.