

Homily.6OrdA.2.12.23
Saint Bernard Church
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THE TWO TREES IN THE GARDEN

Today's Gospel reminds us of the tension between love and justice, between love and obedience.

Jesus' words don't sound very loving, at least by modern standards.

If we break the least of the commandments, He tells us that we'll be least in the kingdom of heaven. We can't be angry with someone. Jesus talks about how we might have to tear out our eye and cut off our hand, though he does not mean that to be taken literally.

It seems that these days we focus almost entirely on the love of Jesus and very little on His justice.

It's very popular to think that Jesus "just loves everybody," and that virtually everyone goes to heaven. So at almost every funeral, it's said that the deceased is now in a better place.

I'm in charge of RCIA here in the parish, the process by which non-Catholics study the Catholic faith and enter the Catholic Church. One of the comments that I hear a lot from non-Catholics is "Gee, the Catholic Church has so many rules!"

So what's the connection, how can we understand, the relationship between love and all the commandments, all the rules?

First of all, God created us out of love. He didn't have to create human beings. But His love was so real, so profound, so generous, that He formed the first man out of clay and blew into his nostrils the breath of God's own life. He gave him the gift of woman, to experience the love and joy of marriage and to share God's power of creating new life.

You might recall from the Book of Genesis that God placed this first man in a garden. In the garden were two trees, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and bad. The first man, Adam, was told in very clear terms not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and bad. If he did that, he would die.

Satan convinced Adam and Eve that they couldn't trust God and they could make up their own minds about what was good and what was evil. They fell for the lie. The temptation that Satan gave to Adam and Eve raised the most important issue in every human being's relationship with God.

Who's in charge of our lives? Is it God, or are we taking over? That temptation is something we all have to deal with every day, maybe several times a day.

God created human beings out of love, and He wanted our love in return. As an expression of His love, God, who is all-wise, reserved to Himself the authority to determine what was good and what was evil. He did this for the sake of humanity, so that we would know how best to live for our own good, our own happiness.

So every one of us has to decide which tree we will choose, the tree of life or the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Are we going to allow God to be in charge of our lives, or will there be times when we push him aside and take over?

There are many reasons today why we are tempted to choose the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

First of all, Satan is good at what he does. He is always making a run at us, tempting us to think for ourselves, to reject what God has commanded us directly or through the authentic teachings of the Church.

Secondly, our culture is very individualistic. So there's a strong tendency for us to think, "I'm in charge of my life." I will choose what I believe and what I don't believe.

Thirdly, even though Jesus says "The truth shall set you free," we associate freedom with the idea that we can decide what is true for us.

Fourth, we all know that there are certain moral decisions that have become very popular, even among Catholics, which are contrary to God's law and the authentic teachings of the Church. Surveys show that the majority of people who identify as Catholic are okay with abortion, contraception, sex outside of marriage and same-sex marriage. Unfortunately, these Catholics can find people in high places in the Church who either agree with them or are very quiet on these issues.

So maybe we think, if we disagree with God's commandments or the teachings of the Church, at least we have plenty of company.

On the other hand, I know lots of Catholics who ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil but then stopped and chose the tree of life.

One couple I know, on a trip to Rome, having visited all the churches, the shrines and the catacombs, made the decision that from now on they would be, in their own words, "all in" when it came to being truly faithful Catholics. They had two more children, started to home school, both decisions which resulted from their new way of thinking and choosing.

They are very active in evangelizing and have brought many non-Catholics into the Catholic Church. Their life now is not only happier, but they are guided by a dynamic, lively faith that has brought a strong sense of mission and purpose into their lives.

A couple of years ago, Msgr. Gaalaas introduced me to a young mother who had been raised as a Lutheran and married a Catholic man. Right after they married, they compromised and decided

to go to a Methodist church. After a few years, the husband was prompted to re-engage with his Catholic faith. He began to study the teachings of the Catholic Church and to share them with his wife.

In a conversation with this woman and Msgr. Gaalaas, this wife and mother said very simply, “When we started living a Catholic lifestyle, for the first time in our marriage, everything started to fit.” So she had decided to become Catholic herself.

I’ll skip the details on my own life and my own marriage, but I’ll say that my personal experience matches completely with the two examples I have just shared with you.

I’m going to close with a question for all of us. When was the second time Jesus wept?

We know about the first time, when Jesus wept over the death of Lazarus. But when was the second time?

It’s described in Luke 19, and I’ll just read the passage to you.

“As Jesus drew near to Jerusalem [knowing He would suffer and die there], he saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If this day you only knew what makes for peace - but now it is hidden from your eyes. For the days are coming upon you when your enemies will raise a barricade against you; they will encircle you and hem you in on all sides. They will smash you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another within you because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.’”

Jesus said this as he looked at the entire city of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Would he be saying this now if He were standing on a high place and looking out over the United States, or over some of our largest cities?

It’s something to think about, to pray about and do something about.