

## **Love Humanity First**

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

November 4, 2018

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Most of us are probably worried about the ways that God is being driven out of our culture. More and more people today have no shame in identifying themselves as atheists, or at least non-believers. Prayer and talking about God is now seen as old fashioned and even offensive. While this bothers me as someone who loves God, on another level, it doesn't bother me at all. That is because for many of them, these very same people love humanity.

In our Gospel from *Mark* today, we hear the story of a scribe asking Jesus, "which is the first of all the commandments?" In reply, Jesus starts with an affirmation of the Old Testament *Shema Israel* (Hear, O Israel) as found in our First Reading from *Deuteronomy*. This was -and still is- the central Jewish prayer which reads, "you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." This is the greatest commandment.

But after affirming that, Jesus, on his own initiative, goes on to add another commandment: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." He is placing this commandment on the same level as the greatest commandment. For Christians, love of God without love of neighbor breaks the greatest commandment, for as *1 John* puts it, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates their brother or sister, they are a liar; for whoever does not love a brother or sister whom they can see cannot love God whom they cannot see." Love of neighbor is just as important.

History is full of people who have claimed to love God, but did not love humanity. They were so wrapped up in supposedly loving God that they never got around to the second part. For as much as they thought they loved God, they were complicit with all kinds of evils and injustices against humanity. Humanity was just too sinful to love or take seriously. These people did not really know God.

Pope Francis says in *The Joy of the Gospel*, "whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God." (272). In other words, the way to really know God is through loving others first. Starting with love of neighbor gives us

common ground with anyone who is striving to take humanity seriously, whether they believe in God or not. In the process, not only will we come to new understandings of God, but we will also open up new possibilities for non-believers to come to belief in God as well.

*If we want to know who God is in our world today, we should start with loving our neighbor.*

Do I try to jump right into loving God? In today's world, there is no credibility in that. Our credibility is when we start with loving our neighbor as ourselves. It is only when we love humanity, hand and hand with others of good will, that we can truly say that we love God with all of our heart, with all of our soul, and with all of our strength.