

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 3, 2024

I believe we like sound bites, don't we? You know those short little phrases or quotes that kind of "summarize" or "sum up" a longer story or thought. We see it all the time on the news and in magazines and, of course, all over the internet. Their appeal is obvious. Why read or listen to a half-hour discussion or argument if it can be encapsulated in just a few words? And the fewer the words, the easier it is to obviously remember. And on top of that, our time is precious, and most of us would rather not waste it if we don't have to.

Of course, as we all know, these little "bits of information" only get us so far. They leave out so much. Instead, we're left with something that is very incomplete, and often misleading.

In a sense, the scribe who approached Jesus in today's Gospel passage from Mark was looking for a kind of "sound bite" from Jesus, a quick, concise answer to his lofty question.

"Which is the first of all the commandments?"

The reason for his question does not seem to be that he was sincerely searching for the answer. I rather think, he was probably already pretty confident of his answer, but wanted to make sure that Jesus "knew" the answer too. And so Jesus quotes from an extremely well-known passage from the Book of Deuteronomy, words that were incredibly important to the Jewish people, words from the mouth of Moses exhorting them to love God with all their heart, soul, and strength. And then he adds,

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The scribe agrees. And unlike many other questions posed to Jesus in Scripture, this one didn't seem to have any mean-spiritedness to it. That doesn't seem to be the scribe's motivation at all. And so Jesus doesn't

really admonish him in any way, but rather affirms the fact that they seem to be on the same page.

“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

But my dear people of God, what do we make of these statements by Jesus? And what do we make of the scribe being in agreement with him? Are these “sound bites” the whole story? Do they paint a complete picture? Do they really answer the question? Or are they incomplete or misleading, an over-simplification of a complex issue?

As I was preparing this homily, it dawned on me that Jesus isn't just giving the scribe two quick answers in order to satisfy his curiosity. He's not just trying to avoid getting into a wordy discussion with him. Rather, he's sort of giving him both the quick “sound-bite” AND the more complete explanation at the same time. Let me explain.

Those famous words from the Book of Deuteronomy and Jesus are beautiful words that can stir our hearts and strengthen our commitment to God. They are inspirational and powerful. It's pretty obvious why the Jewish people considered them as being kind of “sacred” even going so far as to write them down and carry them on their persons at all times.

Yet, what does it mean to love God? Seriously! What does it mean? It sounds good. It sounds more important than just about anything. It makes nearly everyone who hears these words want to get on board with the sentiment behind them. OF COURSE we want to love God with our whole heart, soul, and strength (that is, our complete selves). But what does it really mean? How do we know if we are loving God? There has to be more to it than just saying the words, right? What's the rest of the argument?

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

That's it. That's the crux of the matter, the rest of the point that Jesus is trying to make. That's the "fleshing out" of what those sacred words from Deuteronomy mean - the "how" behind the "what".

My dear friends, it's so easy for us to come here week after week, say some nice things about God the Father, Jesus, and the Spirit, and convince ourselves that our words "mean" that we love God. And yet, Jesus seems to be saying no. He seems to be saying that the ONLY way we can be confident that we truly love God, the only way we can SHOW God and ourselves that our words aren't empty, is to love others. There is no other test. If we want to know about the one, then we have to look at the other. If we want to know that we love God, we better see it in our profound love for our brothers and sisters - not a few, but all.

You see, if we only think about the need to "love God" as if it exists in a vacuum, our understanding (and "so-called" commitment) will remain vague, elusive, ethereal. After all, what does "loving God" really mean when all is said and done? But knowing how to love one another? Knowing how to be good to one another? Knowing how to be kind and merciful? We all know what that looks like. And that's really what "loving God" is all about. We simply can't have one without the other. There is no such thing.