

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind,

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Words from today's Gospel)

(Take out a coin; flip it up in the air.)

You have your choice. Heads or tails?

Which comes first? Heads or tails? 50-50

It comes up equally heads and tails.

But when you speak about a coin, you always say "Heads or tails?"

You don't say "Tails or heads?". You always say "heads" first.

In today's gospel:

Asked by the Pharisees who are trying to trap Jesus,

Which is the greatest commandment? Which of the 517 commandments of the law is the greatest.

Jesus answers, "You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus' answer is like the two sides of one coin.

Love of God and love of neighbor.

Jesus says that there are two commandments.

Just like when we flip a coin, in our daily spiritual life it comes out 50-50. We are to love of God and we are to love our neighbor.

But just like in our speech we always say “heads” first, when speaking about “heads or tails” so does Jesus very intentionally put the commandment of loving our God first. He says that loving God is the first and greatest commandment.

Why does he say that loving God needs to be the first and greatest commandment?

- Is it that God needs our love? I don't think so. Is it that we have a jealous God who wants our attention?**
- Is it that we have a vengeful God who wants us to make up for our sinfulness? No.**

There is a very good reason that Jesus says we must first love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind before we go about loving our neighbor. And the reason is.....

Before giving the reason, Let's take a pause here in the homily.

I ask you to please close your eyes for a moment.

Please close your eyes. Now take a deep breath. Breathe in the air that is around you. Breathe it out slowly letting out all that used air and then breathe in new fresh air. Do it one more time.

- Who gave you that air?**
- How much did it cost you for that air?**
- Of the millions of planets in our world, how many other planets have air which can refresh your lungs? As far as we know, only one planet has fresh air for us to breathe, and that's the one we are on.**

Now take another deep breath. And as you let that air out, thank God for the gift of air, the free gift of air, the gracious gift of air.

Please open your eyes.

My brothers and sisters, ALL we have is gift. EVERYTHING is gift from God. We are rich beyond our dreams. Air, water, plants, animals of all kinds. Do you know that if you earn \$34,000 a year, you are in the top one percentile of rich people in the world? Everything is gift.

St. John says that "God so loved the world that he even gave us his only son as GIFT! ...so that we might not perish but have eternal life. It is all gift.

But we Americans who are so caught up in material things and our own egos that think we own things. This is MY car or MY clothes or MY cell phone. I own it. Now I am not denying that many of us are generous. Some may even give 10% back to God and those in need, but how quickly we forget that EVERYTHING WE HAVE is gift. I read the other day this phrase which challenged me to the core. “You give 10% to God and those in need; OK, that’s great. But what are you doing with the other 90%? Remember, all you have is gift.”

Living in our society, I forget that all is gift from God. That is why in his earthly journey, Jesus continually took time in prayer to recall that all he had was gift from the Father. The Father had poured out his Spirit on the son. His son has poured out his Spirit and love on all of us.

And so, returning to Jesus’ words from today’s gospel in which he reminds us that loving God is the first and greatest commandment, Jesus is teaching us that our love for God comes not because we have first loved him, but that he has first loved us, given us LIFE. It is only to the extent we realize that God has loved us that we can love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind.

And if we love God totally in thanksgiving for all he had done for us, then, and only then, can we have the motivation and strength to love our neighbor as ourselves.

- Only then can we have the perseverance to love our children especially when they become strangers to us in their teenage years,**
- Only then can we have the wisdom to love people of different races and ethnic groups and income levels who see life so different from our selves.**
- Only then can we have the patience to love our parents who are growing old and forgetful and needy.**
- Only then can Democrats and Republicans coexist.**

Sometimes we question our success in raising our children, or in trying to get along with someone at school or work or even with a spouse or significant other. Have you ever had that feeling?

Well, I had that feeling the other day. A fellow pastor asked me if all the work our parish has been doing in our neighborhood has had much success in bringing people to the Lord. Has all the food passed out by St. Vincent de Paul, has all the attempts at block club development, has all the hours on Sunday afternoons reflecting with

the young men who play basketball from the neighborhood really had the results of bringing them closer to the Lord?

Well, to be frank with you, I had no clear answer. In fact, at first, I was rather frustrated with not being able to come up with a clear answer. Then I thought of Jesus' words in today's gospel and I was consoled.

~~(STORY ABOUT THE GOOD SAMARITAN)~~

Are our efforts with our family and friends and neighbors simply to see results of growth in them? Or rather, are not our efforts to love our neighbor a thankful response for outpouring of our love God has bestowed upon me. Day after day, he leads me, guides me, protects me and sustains us. My life, my vocation, my every action needs to be a pouring out of his mercy and compassion for me.

Once we open ourselves in prayer and God fills our hearts with gratefulness, our only fitting response is to love the lord your God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Do this, Jesus says, and you shall have life in abundance.