Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
Dr. Jessie Thomas – Cincinnati, Ohio

Scriptures: Sirach 15: 16-21; Psalm 119: 1-5, 17-18, 33-34; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10; Matthew 5: 17-37

Theme:

Our theme for today is the change that needs to occur in each one of us. We are called to love each other in the very way that we are loved by God. Jesus tells us how it must be done. Of course the choice is ours. To grow in the image of God does not just happen. It must be willed, chosen and practiced.

Sermon

According to legend, Valentine’s Day takes its name from a young Christian priest who lived in ancient Rome. Like so many other early Christians, Valentine had been imprisoned because of his faith. He often thought longingly of his loved ones and wanted to assure them that he loved them and he was okay. Beyond his cell window, just within reach, grew a cluster of violets. He picked some of the heart shaped leaves and pricked them with the words, “Remember your Valentine,” and sent them off by a friendly dove. He continued sending messages that simply said “I love you.” St. Valentine loved God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, and his neighbor as himself. He loved God and his brothers and sisters so much that he was even willing to die for them - as Jesus died for all of us in order that the truth of God’s love would not be denied. That happened on February 14th in the year 312. And so, through the ages, those who love send Valentine cards to express their love for one another.

On this Sunday before Valentine’s Day the Gospel of Matthew addresses the importance of having a right relationship with God as well as with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Another way to express the same thought simply is, “Love God and Love Your Neighbor.” In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus instructed the Matthean community about his teachings and their relationship to the Torah as well as finding its center as the demand for love.

In today’s pericope from Matthew Jesus explains the reason for his proclamation of the Sermon on the Mount. As the “new” Moses, Jesus brought the new law and the new authority. Jesus assures the disciples and assures us today that his coming has nothing to do with the law of the First Testament but rather to raise it to a different level. As the final interpreter of the law Jesus came to bring the law to fulfillment. The value of God’s word is emphasized in today’s reading; so much so that he issues a dire warning to anyone who seeks to lessen the impact of that word: “whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” The questions we might ask ourselves today is, “How do we become great in God’s kingdom and how do we understand the two greatest commandments, “To love God and to love our neighbor”?

Many of us believe that “becoming great” in God’s kingdom simply means to attend church on a regular basis especially on Sunday; however, more is required. Becoming great in God’s kingdom requires us to understand the covenant relationship which we have with our God.
Becoming great requires us to understand that we are co-creators appointed by our God and with that comes a responsibility to care for all of God’s creations and that includes one another. Becoming great requires us to love our God and our neighbor.

In our first reading from the Book of Sirach these words can be found, “Before man are life and death, good and evil, whichever he chooses shall be given him.” God has given to us the gift of free will and choice. Choosing to love God and one another is surely among the good choices of life.

However, at times we find that making such a choice is difficult because the view from our lenses may be clouded. We may interpret loving our neighbor as those who are members of our families, those who live in our gated communities, or those who attend our churches on Sunday morning. With this view, I think Jesus would tell us that it is very good, but simply not enough.

The neighbor who Jesus talks about is anybody who is around us – the people who live on our street, the people who live in our neighborhoods, the people who live in our city, the people who live in our county or municipality or parish, the people who live in our state or province, the people who live in our country. Our neighbors include everybody who lives on our planet! They are the people we like, and people we don’t like. They are people who have a different cultural upbringing than us; they have a different skin color, a different shape to their eyes, a different language, and a different belief system. Like us, they were created by God. Like them or not, they are our neighbors, our brothers and sisters in Christ and we are told to love our neighbors – and loving someone also implies forgiving them when they offend against us, or against our ideals or beliefs.

As Catholic Christians, we are called by our faith to care for others regardless of their race, creed or culture. Our job is to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and care for those who are weak and infirmed. Simply, we are called to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So, if we love God the way that we say we do, then we will have no problem loving each other as Jesus has called us to do. And, certainly we will be looked upon with favor in the Kingdom of God.

Choosing life is a simple matter of choosing love rather than hate, forgiveness rather than bitterness, words of kindness rather than words of disrespect, deeds of helpfulness - rather than selfishness.

"Who is my neighbor?" That is the question famously posed to Jesus by an unnamed lawyer who painted himself into the corner by attempting to test the upstart and self-appointed rabbi from Galilee. "Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus did not respond directly with an answer, but instead with another question? "What is the law? What is written?" Jesus understood that the lawyer knew exactly what to say, and of course right on cue he replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with your entire mind. And, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Then Jesus said: “So what is the problem? ‘What about any of this do you not understand?’ ‘How do you live your life?’ ‘Do this and you will live?’ Perhaps the lawyer was quietly thinking, “That is surely not the answer which I expected, I was thinking more along the lines of Who qualifies as ‘neighbor’ according to the Torah?"
How do I limit the field to fit my definition? Who is in? Who is out? Whom can I exclude and still satisfy the letter of the law and my own conscience?

Many of us, like the lawyer can recite the words, love God and love neighbor but often we too look for ways to include only certain kinds of people. We look for people who live in our neighborhoods; we look for people who belong to our country club, or we may only choose our friends from people who look just like us.

Like the lawyer we must also be reminded that the love of God is broader and wider than our imagination could ever grasp.

So, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:27) Jesus was very clear in defining the word “neighbor,” in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus does not talk about how righteous we are (or should be) because we follow the rituals and the laws but rather talks about how we should behave towards our neighbors. (Acts of Faith-James 2:14-26)

Today, I am reminded of the questions in the “Baltimore Catechism” of my youth. “Why did God make you?” The answer is, God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next.

Amen.