

A golfer teed up his ball on the first tee, took a mighty swing and hit his ball into a clump of trees. He found his ball and saw an opening between 2 trees he thought he could hit through. Taking out his 3-wood, he took a mighty swing. The ball hit a tree, bounced back, hit him in the forehead and killed him. As he approached the gates of heaven, St. Peter asked, "Are you a good golfer?" The man replied: "Got here in 2, didn't I?"

The bride was escorted down the aisle and when she reached the altar, the groom was standing there with his golf bag and clubs at his side. She whispered: "What are your golf clubs doing here? He looked her right in the eye and said, "This isn't going to take all day, is it?"

The police are called to an apartment and find a woman holding a bloody 3-iron standing over a lifeless man. The detective asks, "Ma'am, is that your husband?" "Yes," says the woman. "Did you hit him with that golf club?" "Yes, yes, I did." The woman begins to sob, drops the club and puts her hands on her face. "How many times did you hit him?" "I don't know – put me down for a 5."

First, the gospel text. The scribe's question was a topic of popular debate in the first century. It is said that in those days a questioner challenged Hillel and Shammai, the 2 greatest rabbis of the early first century, to teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one leg. Hillel replied, "Do not do to your neighbor what is hateful to you; this is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary." (See R.T. France, THE GOSPEL OF MARK: A COMMENTARY ON THE GREEK TEXT)

Jesus did not quote Hillel, but went to Scripture. He quoted the passage from Deuteronomy that was our first reading -- a prayer-teaching that serves as something like a hinge between the commandments and all the regulations intended to flesh them out. It is also the oldest prayer formula in the scriptural tradition. As such, Jews were supposed to recite it every morning and evening. Deuteronomy 6:7-9 tells people to teach it to their children, to bind the prayer as a symbol on their hand and forehead, and to inscribe it on their doorposts. This prayer/creed would be etched deep in every faithful person's consciousness and have a subconscious effect stronger than any 21<sup>st</sup> century advertising. It is no wonder that Jesus could respond so quickly and unequivocally to the scribe's question.

But then Jesus added another citation, revising Hillel, he quoted Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Although Mark doesn't finish the quotation, almost everyone who heard it would have known that the last words of that command were, "I am the Lord."

In response to the scribe, Jesus combined 2 of the popular schools of thought of His day, implicitly connecting heaven and earth, love of God and love of neighbor as 2 inseparable dimensions of a life of faith. The Lord in whom the people believed, who gave them their identity as a people, demanded that they treat one another with the same attitude of love that they were to show the God who gave them life. (adapted from CELEBRATION, 4 November 2018, p. 3)

So a word about love of God and then love of neighbor. If we read the Letters of John in the New Testament, they keep repeating 'God is Love,' 'Love one another,' over and over. There is a story about the Apostle John, who in the evening of his long life, would sit for hours with his younger disciples gathered at his feet. One day, one of his disciples complained: "John, you always talk about love, about God's love for us and about our love for one another. Why don't you tell us about something else besides love?" The beloved disciple who once, as a young man, had laid his head over the Lord's heart at the Last Supper, is said to have replied; "Because there is nothing else, just love....love....love." (PREACHING WELL, Vol IV, #6, Ed by James F.

Colaiani, jr.) And that's where we start. God has first loved us – into being, sustaining us at every moment. God – LOVE -- is our beginning, our middle and our end. God – LOVE -- is our destiny. The fullness of love gives us a lifetime to learn how to love so that we can be in His fullness of love for all eternity at the end of our earthly lives.

In Sao Jose dos Campos, Brazil, a remarkable prison exists. More than 700 inmates convicted of crimes of murder, assault, robbery, and drug-dealing are serving time. 2 full-time, unarmed staff members operate the prison with help from volunteers. Charles Colson, who served time for his transgressions in the Watergate scandal of the 1970's, reported on his visit to the prison. He was admitted by a murderer who was in charge of the gate! Smiling faces greeted him. Order and cleanliness surrounded inmates who were hard at work.

This amazing prison is operated on Christian principles of love of God and respect for one another. Each prisoner is accountable to another inmate. Religious programs, classes on self-development and educational opportunities are offered. Those who serve time at Humanita Prison return to jail at a rate of 4%, compared to 75% for the rest of Brazil.

When Colson inquired about the amazing statistic, his guide led him to a cell used for solitary confinement. Unlocking the door, the guide swung it wide open. The cell housed only one prisoner – an exquisitely carved crucifix, Jesus hanging on the cross. "He's doing time for the rest of us," the guide explained. That message, which best illustrates the love of God, has changed the hearts of hundreds of inmates. (Pattie Normile, source not cited) Love of others will always be hard for us – but in the context of the immense love that God has shown to us, we immediately get the understanding that whatever we do is small in comparison to the love demonstrated by the cross.

So, third, love of neighbor. Jesus COMMANDED us to love – so we know love is not just a feeling, since we cannot command feelings. Love is an act of the will our tradition teaches. Jesus did not say: When you get healed, love; when you grow up, love; when you feel loving, love; When you get it together and have dealt with all your mother/father/spouse/children wounds, then you must love. No, the commandment for all of us is to LOVE now, and thus fill the tragic gaps of every moment. (adapted from Richard Rohr, posting of 9 Jan 2013)

St. John of the Cross stated, "Where there is no love, put love." Once when I was giving a talk on marriage, a man came up afterward and said, "I like what you said. But every situation is so different. Look at my marriage. I'm really worried. My wife and I just don't have the same feelings for each other we used to have. I guess I just don't love her anymore and she doesn't love me. What can I do?" "The feeling isn't there anymore?" I asked. "That's right," he affirmed. "And we have 3 children we're really concerned about. What do you suggest?" "Love her," I replied. "I told you, the feeling just isn't there anymore." "Love her." "You don't understand. The feeling of love just isn't there." "Then love her. If the feeling isn't there, that's a good reason to love her." "But how do you love when you don't love?" "My friend, love is a verb. A decision. The *feeling* is a FRUIT of love, the decision. So love her. Serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate. Affirm. Are you willing to do that?"

The problem is that we have swallowed the Hollywood script that we are not really responsible, that we are just the product of our feelings. But the Hollywood script does not give the truth. If our feelings control our actions, it is because we have abdicated our responsibility and allowed our feelings to run wild and rule our lives. NO, love is a decision. Feelings change by the minute. True love remains. True love speaks from the cross: "Father, forgive them."

In his poem, 'The Indiscriminate Host,' John Shea writes: *The banquet is open to all who are willing to sit down with all.* There is a whole lot contained in that line. What Shea suggests is that the single condition for going to heaven is to have the kind of heart and the kind of openness that makes it possible for us to sit down with absolutely anyone – and to share life and a table with him or her. For Shea, then, the best way we can prepare to die is to begin to stretch our hearts to love ever wider and wider, to begin to love in a way that takes us beyond the natural narrowness and discrimination that exists within our hearts because of temperament, wound, timidity, ignorance, selfishness, race, religion, circumstance, and our place in history. We prepare to die by pushing ourselves to love less narrowly. In that sense, readying ourselves for death is really an ever-widening entry into life.

John Powell, in his book, UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, tells the story of a young student of his who was dying of cancer. In the final stages of his illness, he came to see Powell and said something like this: "Father, you once told us something in class that has made it easier for me to die young. You said: "There are only 2 potential tragedies in life, and dying young isn't one of them. These are the 2 real tragedies: *If you go through life and you don't love.....and if you go through life and you don't tell those whom you love that you love them.*" When the doctors told me that I didn't have very long to live, I realized how much I have been loved. I've been able to tell my family and others how much they mean to me. I've expressed love. People ask me: "What's it like being 24 years old and dying?" I tell them: "It's not so bad. It beats being 50 years old and having no values!"

We prepare ourselves for death by loving deeply and especially by expressing love, appreciation, and gratitude to each other. Jesus says much the same thing. In John 12, where the woman at Bethany poured an entire bottle of expensive ointment on His feet and dried His feet with her hair, Jesus commented on her lavish expression of affection and gratitude by saying: 'She has just anointed me for my impending death.' What He meant by that should not be piously misinterpreted. He wasn't saying: 'Since I am going to be dead in a while anyway, let her waste this ointment!' He was saying rather: 'When I come to die, it will be easier to die when I have been, even if only for a moment, fully loved, and therefore fully alive.' (adapted from AGAINST AN INFINITE HORIZON, Rolheiser, p. 77-78)

We need to quit arguing – about politics, religion, parish life, music, space – and get down to what we have been commanded to do – the one essential thing in life -- love God and neighbor. That will be enough work for all of us for a lifetime. Let the church say AMEN.