

A group of women in Perth, Australia were at a seminar on how to live in a loving relationship with their husbands. The women were asked, "How many of you love your husbands?"

All the women raised their hands. Then they were asked, "When was the last time you told your husband you loved him?" Some women answered today, a few yesterday, and some couldn't remember. The women were then told to take out their cell phones and text their husband – "I love, you, Sweetheart." Next the women were instructed to exchange phones with one another and read aloud the text message they received in response to their message. Here are some of the replies.

1. Who in the world is this?
2. Eh, mother of my children, are you sick or what?
3. Yeah, and I love you too. What's wrong?
4. What now? Did you wreck the car again?
5. What in the world did you do now?
6. Don't beat around the bush, just tell me how much you need.
7. Am I dreaming?
8. If you don't tell me who this message is actually for, someone will die.
9. I thought we agreed you wouldn't drink during the day.
10. Your mother is coming to stay with us, isn't she?

OK, down to business. This is a critical gospel text. If we get this one right, we get all of religion right. If we get it wrong, we get all of religion wrong. The first commandment, the one from which all others flow, concerns the one God. Divine oneness –UNITY -- is absolute, the Creator of All, the origin of All, and the model for all. ONE is key. One God, one model of unity, one model of love. Therefore, we as creatures should imitate this oneness by bringing ourselves into complete alignment with the One. Heart, soul, mind, and strength should be united in loving communion with God. When this happens, a second commandment arises. The one God makes all people one; the neighbor must be loved as ourself. Although these are 2, they are inseparable. Therefore, they form one commandment, 'the first.'

This 2-fold first commandment is engaged by an interior act of love. This establishes the proper flow, from the inside to the outside, from a unitive consciousness -- to acts that create unity. This is precisely what is threatened when believers are faced with many laws. We ask what is the law, and what does it entail, and how we can keep it, and what's the least possible that I need to do. Our consciousness is outside and the emphasis is on obedient behavior, keeping the law. The inner world that accompanies the behavior is overlooked. The law can be kept with a hard heart, a dark mind, a sick soul, a mean and stingy spirit. This causes a split between the inside and outside and fuels the conflict between the spirit and letter of the law. It also grounds one of God's deepest laments, as recorded in the Book of Isaiah: "These people draw near with their mouths, and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me." (Is 29:13).

To love according to this great commandment of love is much more important than all of our church attendance and novenas. The inner attitude behind those things is critical – the inner attitude of loving God and neighbor. We are told that the scribe answered wisely because wisdom is always a hearing of the Word that leads to doing. The scribe heard Jesus' word and realized the priority of love of God and neighbor over liturgical obligations. If this realization is pursued, it will change how he worships. This realization also moves him beyond questions of Law and toward the experience of the kingdom of God.

In the Kingdom of God, detailed legislation and Temple sacrifice are over. It is not a matter of theological debate about which commandment is first or of just recognizing that love of God and love of neighbor takes precedent over church stuff. It is a more radical recognition that a community that includes Jews has to go beyond the boundaries of Judaism. Jewish cultic practices are being replaced by universal practices of prayer: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for ALL nations." (Mk 11:7).

By evaluating the scribe not in terms of his legal knowledge but in terms of the kingdom of God, Jesus has shown that he is at a depth that legal wrangling cannot reach. In fact, Jesus has consistently undercut the theological positions of the religious elite by taking them into water over their head. Even in this friendly encounter, Jesus does not settle for agreement. He takes the conversation to the next level. (adapted from John Shea, EATING WITH THE BRIDEGROOM, p. 261-262)

Second, dealing with love of God and neighbor at a kingdom level, not a legal level, changes all kinds of things. In the book of Jeremiah, God says, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people..." (Jer 31:33) They know God because the law is written in their hearts. The proper flow is established – from inner realization to outer action.

This inner consciousness of love of God and neighbor has priority because there are not enough laws to cover the territory of human reality. There are an endless variety of human situations, and within that endless variety there is endless nuance. Laws are unable to foresee everything and predict proper behavior. But people who are equipped with a steady, loving interior will find a way to embody that love in all circumstances in life.

In one of my assignments there was a man who had no legs below the knees who would sit outside of this one grocery store. Winter or summer, he was there – a large plastic cup positioned between the stubs of his knees.

I almost always gave him some money – usually on my way out. Then one day as I was approaching the store, I saw a woman squatting down next to him and talking with great animation. As I turned to go into the store, I heard her say, 'So you haven't always lived here...?' She was inquiring about his life, caring for him in a personal way. My several dollars tossed in his cup seemed impersonal, even demeaning.

But where did she get this generous form of presence? There are no laws to guide her. But I think there was an inner consciousness of love that bumped into a situation and found a way to express itself. Love of the transcendent God makes us one with our neighbor, but it does not tell us what to do in every situation. But if we can hold onto the consciousness, a way will open, a way impossible to forecast, a way beyond prescription.

Think of this in terms of our reaction to those who are here in our country illegally. We so easily hide behind law – which absolves us of the deeper issue of love of God and love of neighbor. The gospel is clear, the way through is the path of love. I'm often shocked at how callous the responses are – by churchgoers -- people who supposedly love God and neighbor. We are supposed to be about the kingdom of God – and have a kingdom consciousness – which always goes beyond any law. A consciousness in tune with God and neighbor is alert to possibilities that no law could ever foresee.

But this inner consciousness of love of God and neighbor also has priority because there are many laws that do cover a lot of territory, but some of them are actually unjust. Here's a very simple example. A retirement community has 'respect' as one of its guiding values. In order to implement respect, the leadership has created a list of tips:

*"This is not claimed as original material; it is the fruit of years of reading and research, collated by volunteers, but not always correctly footnoted, or not footnoted at all. It was created solely for the purpose of an oral proclamation in the context of the liturgy of the church. Every effort has been made to provide the necessary attribution to the authors of the sources."*

1. Use Mr., Mrs., or Miss with last names unless they invite you to call them by their first name.
2. Try to be the same height as the older person (for ex., if they are in a wheelchair, pull up a chair; if they are in bed, sit down beside them.
3. Address questions directly to them, not indirectly through caregivers.

The list goes on. Yet, as helpful as these tips are, they are not enough. It is always a person who acts. Therefore, where they are 'at' internally when they engage in these behaviors is important. Even the most objectively respectful action can be undercut by an inner, unmindful or disrespectful attitude. All the tips begin with words such as "use," "Try," "Start," "Speak," "Touch," "Accept" for the person who is initiating an action. But with what consciousness is the action being performed?

Both where there are no laws and where there are many laws, the question of the proper flow from inside to outside is important. If God writes the double commandment to love in our hearts -- and we learn how to read it daily, we move within the true Spirit of the Law -- which is to recreate the original ONENESS of God -- and we move even beyond the Law, and we are not far from the Kingdom of God. Amen. (adapted from Shea, Op.cit., p. 262-264)