

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

We tend to think that our modern means of communication is something new. For instance, “the sound bite” is considered an invention of today’s communicators and prognosticators. Not so!

The earliest thinkers valued brevity in sharing their wisdom. For example Plato summed up the entire philosophical system of his teacher, Socrates, with two words, “Know thyself”. Julius Caesar wrote a book, *On The Gallic Wars*, over which every Latin student that ever was has had to labor. He summed up his entire experience with three words, “Veni, Vidi, Vici”, “I came, I saw, I conquered”. It is in that vein that Jesus sums up the teaching of the entire Law of Moses and the Prophets, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” BAM! THAT’S IT! “Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

It’s as simple as that, but we still don’t get it, do we? If we did, the world would be a perfect place and we would all be perfect people. There would be no more wars or hatred; no more racism or sexism; no more poverty or hunger or homelessness; no more addiction and imprisonment; no more divisions between people. But that’s not the world we live in, nor is that the way we are. So, how do we get there?

Well, since I am maybe a little backwards myself, let’s start at the end of these commandments, “love your neighbor as yourself”. What does it mean to love your self? The Lord certainly can’t mean a self-love that is self-centered. That is the kind of love in the ancient Greek myth that tells about a young man named Narcissus, who rejected all who would love him. While gazing at his own reflection in a pool of water, he saw how handsome he was, and fell in love with himself. He became so enamored of himself that he fell into the pool and drowned. What the ancient storytellers were trying to get across is that total preoccupation with self leads to destruction. As a result, today, we speak of “narcissism” as a debilitating form of emotional and mental illness.

No, Jesus was speaking of another form of self-love that is positive. It is called self-esteem, self-respect, and acceptance that we are persons of worth. This comes about when we know, not only who we are, but whose we are.

There is another story that helps us to understand this concept. It is the tale of a boy who found an egg in a nest while walking in the woods. He took it home and placed it with the eggs under a goose. When it hatched, it was a freakish creature with deformed feet—unwebbed and claw-like—that made it stumble as it tried to follow the little goslings. It had a beak that was pointed and twisted instead of flat. Its down was an ugly brown instead of a light yellow; and, to top it off, he made a terrible squawking sound. One day a giant eagle flew across the barnyard. The eagle swept lower and lower until the strange, awkward little bird on the ground lifted his head and pointed his crooked beak into the sky.

The misfit creature then stretched his wings out and began to hobble across the yard. He flapped his wings harder and harder until the wind picked him up and carried him higher and higher. He began to soar through the clouds. He had discovered what he was. He was born an eagle! He had been trying to live like a goose.

When we get too caught up in this world, we are like that little bird. We are trying to live like all the geese around us. We have lost sight of the truth that we were born to soar like eagles. Our self-worth is in the fact that we are children of the God of our creation who came to dwell among us to save us—to save us from living like geese when He made us to soar like eagles. When we know whose we are, we can be happy with who we are.

Jesus tells us that we are to love “our neighbor as we love ourselves”. That is to say that we are to love our neighbor with the same high regard, esteem, and worth we see in ourselves as children of God. He resolved the question of who is our neighbor in his parable of The Good Samaritan, the one who picked up the beaten, bloodied stranger off the side of the road, and provided care and housing for him out of his own pocket, when the supposed righteous person and holy person passed him by. The Inspired Author of our first reading today from Exodus makes this a Sacred Demand: “Thus says the Lord: ‘You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry.’”

If we dare to listen to this Word of God with ears to hear, we realize that He is talking to us today about the millions of undocumented immigrants who have come here to provide for their families, much as our forebears came as immigrants to provide for us, their children and grandchildren. He is talking to us about the millions of refugees, largely women and children and elderly people, homeless because of war and famine, who long to find a home among us, but we are intent on banishing from our land because a few may be intending to do us harm. Shouldn’t we be more concerned about what He threatens if we ignore their cries: “My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans”?

Some may say, “C’mon, Father, that was then; this is now. It’s different now.” Maybe it is, but God’s Word is eternal. We change. He doesn’t. Why would we tempt the Lord, our God?

Which leads us to the first premise Jesus gives us as the Great Commandment: “Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

What does it mean to love God “with all your heart”. Many of us who sincerely seek after God are afraid to seek with the whole heart. We’ve heard of people who gave their hearts to God and it frightens us—people like Mother Teresa or St. Francis or St. Paul who speaks to us today from his Letter to the Thessalonians, “become imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you become a model for all the believers.” To love God “with all your heart” demands passion and commitment. Unfortunately, nothing seems to scare our generation more than passion, except commitment.

Too many of us, in our relationship with God, like to hang out with him, like the fellow who goes with a girl for years and years. They may even come to live together, perhaps have children together, but he can’t bring himself to make a commitment and marry her. Lots of people go around with God for a long time. They go to church, they go through the motions, they date God on Sunday, but there is no commitment. As a result, they don’t find much satisfaction in their religious life and it has little impact on the lives they live. They keep trying to walk with the geese. After all, if they get excited about God, it may cause them to get involved in some time-consuming issue. They may come to feel so strongly about something that they will have to act. They may feel obliged to take their stewardship seriously and begin to give a significant proportion of their income for the Lord’s work. They may get so excited about what God is doing in their lives that they would have to share it with others. In short, loving God with our whole heart can be costly, but it is the only way to make the relationship rewarding, and it is only as rewarding in proportion to how much of ourselves we put into it.

The Lord then tells us to love the Lord, our God “with all your soul”. The soul is our most basic expression of who we are, and who we are is revealed by what we do. To use the analogy we spoke of earlier, stop looking down at the ground and trying to walk like a goose. Look up! Look up to God! Start flapping your wings, harder and harder, and fly like an eagle. That means you choose to do something because God said, “Do it!” And you choose not to do something because God said, “Do not do it!” God’s intent is for us to soar with Him to the highest heavens, but we’ll never get there if we don’t follow where He leads us.

Finally, Jesus says to love the Lord, our God, “with all your mind”. Faith and reason are not contrary to each other; rather they complement each other. Faith is not blind obedience to a person or, a state or institution, or a set of rules and regulations. God does not require us to give up the capacity to think. He gave us our minds so that we might come to know and understand Him. But that will only happen if we take the time to read and study and pray over the Word He speaks to us in the Sacred Scriptures and the teachings revealed to the Church. Only with such knowledge can we come to fully appreciate His love for us.

Recently a man who happens to be an M.D. and is studying to become a Deacon who comes to me for spiritual direction explained to me how this came about for him. He said, though he knew much about God and was always a believer, he never had what he had heard of as an experience of God. So he determined to read all four of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. He read them. Then he read them again. On his third reading, he took his time and read them prayerfully. He said that it was during this third reading, when he actually came to know Jesus personally that he had an overwhelming experience of the awesomeness of God and the wondrousness of His love for him. That is loving God “with all your mind”.

Coming to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves is not something that we perfect all at once. When Jesus said, “You must be perfected as your Heavenly Father is perfect,” he intended for us to understand that it is by God’s grace we are perfected. Love is never an easy task. It requires effort and commitment that sometimes seems impossible in our busy, frustrating, wearying every-day lives. Sometimes we become just too impatient or too tired to try. Sometimes we find ourselves face to face with people who are often just plain unlovable. But I take comfort in a Valentine’s Day card I once received (yes, every now and then, even a priest receives a Valentine’s Day card). On the cover it said, “I LOVE YOU TERRIBLY”. Inside were the words, “BUT I’LL IMPROVE WITH PRACTICE”.

Yes, it is true—to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself—is the GREAT COMMANDMENT. It is also the secret of a fulfilling life on earth and a foretaste of the life to come.

It is the way of God. It is the way of the Eagle. FLY EAGLES FLY!!!