

**Sunday, May 17, 2020**

**Cape Breton Family of Parishes**

**Gospel Reading: John 14:15-21**

In today's Gospel, there is both an exhortation and a promise. The exhortation is that we keep Jesus' commandments, and the promise is that Jesus would send us an advocate, the Holy Spirit, so that we are not left orphaned. We will reflect on the meaning and significance of the advocate, the Holy Spirit, two weeks later when we celebrate the feast of the Pentecost. Today, we will stay with Jesus' exhortation to keep his commandments.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (verse 15), and "those who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me" (verse 21). These two verses make it amply clear that to love Jesus is to keep his commandments. But, what is the commandment? Two times in John's Gospel we have been given the answer to this question: First, "I give you a **new** commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another" (John 13:34). Second, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Evidently, Jesus' commandment in John's Gospel is that we love one another.

John 13:34 says that this commandment is a **new** commandment. Why is this **new**? It is new because Jesus' commandment is to love **humans**, whereas the Great commandment which Moses gave to the Jews in the Old Testament was to love **God**, not humans: "Hear, O Israel... You shall love the **Lord your God** with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). This commandment to love God was so important that they were to recite it to their children, talk about it when they lie down and rise, bind it on their hand, fix it as an emblem on their forehead, and write it on both the doorposts of their house and on their gates (Deuteronomy 6: 7-9), so that everyone who enters their house could at first see this great commandment. Again, it was only by **loving God** that their "days could be long" (Deuteronomy 6:2), everything will "go well with them" (Deuteronomy 6:3), and that they could "multiply greatly" (Deuteronomy 6:3).

So, since almost everything in life – long life, prosperity, and even progeny would be taken care of by obeying this one single commandment of loving God, another commandment to love one's neighbour was deemed superfluous by the Jews. That is why, whereas the injunctions to love God **abound** in the Old Testament, there is only **one single** occurrence of the injunction to love one's neighbour in the entire Torah (Leviticus 19:18). For the Jewish people, loving God was all that was necessary to enter into heaven, which was expressed primarily by offering sacrifices and worship in the Temple of Jerusalem.

This is why Jesus' commandment to love 'one another' ('neighbour' in the Synoptic Gospels) becomes the **new** commandment. It is new because Jesus, in the Gospels, brings about a Copernican revolution by changing the rules and criteria to obtain the kingdom of God. If the Jews believed that salvation was obtainable by loving **God alone** (expressed through sacrifices and worship), Jesus said that salvation could be obtained **by loving the neighbour**, because loving God is to love the neighbour. This becomes quite clear in the last chapter of John's Gospel where Jesus asked Peter three times to **feed his sheep** if Peter really loved Jesus (John 21:15-17). Later, in his First Letter, John the evangelist would reinforce this thesis that we can love God only by loving the neighbour (1 John 3: 16, 18, 23; 4: 7, 8, 11, 12, 20, 21).

This thesis that the love of neighbour is an imperative to obtain salvation (that is, to be really joyful and be at peace within) finds further reinforcement in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 19: 16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18: 18-23) where a rich young man enquires of Jesus as to which of the Ten Commandments given by Moses (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21) he should obey in order to obtain eternal life. In his response, in all three Gospels, Jesus leaves out the first three commandments given by Moses relating to our relationship

with God, and recommends to the rich young man the commandments that concern our love of neighbour. And, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus concluded his answer to the rich young man by resurrecting the commandment in Leviticus 19:18 which had long faded into oblivion: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 19:19).

Having said all that, to allay all fears and doubts, an important point needs to be made. In John's Gospel, if the explicit commandment of Jesus was to love "one another," it was because the Johannine community was divided into various factions. They lacked love and concern for others as the community was highly schismatic (divisive). Hence, the Johannine Jesus' unequivocal injunction to love "one another." However, this did not exempt the community from loving God, which becomes very clear in Jesus' exhortations like, "Abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15:4), and "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Even in the final chapter of John's Gospel, the risen Jesus' final question to Peter is: "Simon, son of John, do you love **me** more than all these?" (John 21:15-17). And, in all three Synoptic Gospels, the New Testament Love Commandment was always formulated by Jesus as both "loving God" **and** "loving the neighbour" (Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:27).

The upshot of it all is that the Biblical Love Commandment is always to love God. But, **how** do you do that? We can love God only by loving God's people. An attempt at proving this thesis by making a reference to the innumerable Gospel parables in this regard is beyond the scope of a Sunday homily. Therefore, we end this brief reflection by listening to God Him/Herself speaking to St Catherine of Siena, a great Catholic Mystic. God tells Catherine in a vision:

"I ask you to love me with the same love with which I love you. But for me you cannot do this, for I loved you without being loved. Whatever love you have for me you owe me, so you love me not gratuitously but out of duty, while I love you not out of duty but gratuitously. So you cannot give me the kind of love I ask of you. This is why I have put you among your neighbors, so that you can do for them what you cannot do for me – that is, love them without any concern for thanks and without looking for any profit for yourself. And whatever you do for them I will consider done for me" (*The Dialogue*, Chapter 64)..... (Please read Matthew 25: 40)

This is the meaning of Jesus' commandment in John's Gospel: to love God by loving God's people. But, to love God's people is a tall order. However, with God's help, nothing is impossible for us (John 14:13-14). Amen.

**God Bless You. Have a Nice Day**

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