

**30<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - 2005**  
*“Love of Neighbor”*

The Sadducees had thrown in the towel. The Pharisees are still trying to trap Jesus. Like punch-drunk boxers, they wade into Jesus again, hoping to get in a lucky punch. They are avid keepers of the law. They are the enforcers of the law. The law is their life’s blood. So they ask their question: *“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”* Much to their chagrin, Jesus not only answers correctly, he takes love of God to a whole new level. In effect Jesus says, *“You cannot love God without loving your neighbor.”*

And by saying that, Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They claimed to love God, but they obviously did not love Jesus, whom they were trying to trap. Love of God and love of neighbor go together. Of course, we still have difficulty with this most familiar, fundamental teaching underscored here by Jesus. We still want to separate loving God and loving neighbor as though they belonged in two different worlds. The secular and religious worlds couldn’t have anything in common, could they? So, to help us make this connection, the Church has given us our first reading today from the book of Exodus.

*“You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves. You shall not wrong a widow or an orphan. If you do, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with a sword, then your own wives will be widows and your children orphans.”*

We wince at these harsh words, but they drive home their point: How outrageous it is to mistreat the helpless! And as we reflect on these words further, we can even see their truth for our own day. Oppression, politically sanctioned or otherwise, leads to poverty, violence and bloodshed. We are

embarrassed that the world saw the aftermath of Katrina, the miserable conditions in which some Americans live; the looting, the graft, the violence. It was not God's fault. Over the years, too many people were on the take. There was too much selfishness and greed in peoples' hearts that led to this lingering disaster. Eventually, what is hidden from our eyes erupts into view. Like a wounded animal, the injured lash out and the oppressed fight back. That is war. That is domestic violence. That is racism. That is sexism. That is drive-by-shootings. That is terrorism. It's been 2000 years and we still don't get it.

*To love my neighbor as I love myself* means that I must place myself in the situation of my neighbor, as illustrated by our reading from Exodus. I must put myself in the place of the poor, the widow, the weak and the powerless. I must treat them as I would want to be treated if I were in their situation. But why is this so important? Someone has said, and I'm inclined to believe it, that all sin is selfishness in one form or the other. If that is true, "*loving your neighbor as you love yourself*" is the antidote to being selfish. In treating others more humanely, we become more human.

Can you think of a sin that is not an act of selfishness in one form or the other? It's obvious in sins of greed, lust and covetousness. To take advantage of another person in some dishonest way is, by any other name, selfishness. But it is also true of sins like adultery, sexual abuse or murder. Holding a grudge is a selfish act. Overindulgence of any kind is a selfish act. Hugh Hefner's life is all about Hugh Hefner. Pornography is all about one's personal pleasure, nothing else. It has no socially redeeming value. How many families are now being torn apart by gambling? To call it "gaming" makes it sound so innocent. But it's dangerous, and can become sinfully selfish. It is also destroying marriages and families.

*“Love your neighbor as you love yourself”* is another way Jesus says to us, *“Take your eyes off of yourself once in a while. The world does not revolve around you. It is bigger than you, and you have an important place in it. Yes, take care of yourself. You, your health and your well-being are as important as the next guy’s. But he is also as important as you. And you must love him with the same care as you love yourself.”*

Father Ron Rolheiser puts it something like this: Our culture here in the United States is very powerful and so alluring that it can swallow us whole. Its beauty, power, and promise generally take away our breath and our perspective. We think it will save us, as long as we have enough money, good sex, the freedom to do what we want, and the good life. For the most part, it has entertained, amused, distracted and numbed us into a state-of-mind where we no longer have a perspective beyond that of our culture and its short-range, short lived salvation. We have little need for God because we have everything else. We don’t like to bump into the poor because they tell us that our world is really an illusion. It is not real. In the real world, people are starving, dying from malnutrition, violence, drugs, abuse and war. And Jesus is telling us we cannot just stand by and let it happen as though it doesn’t matter. *“If you love God, you will help them.”* Salvation does not come from anyone or anything but Jesus and God’s love.

For our own good, we must place our lot, somehow, with those who are suspect in our culture, namely the poor, with their many faces, the aged, the handicapped, the gay, the sick, the dying, the unattractive, and all who are not valued by our culture. We must touch them to gain a perspective beyond our culture. After all, Jesus did say, *“Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, that you do unto me.”* For us who claim to love God, how’s that for perspective?

An anonymous person put it this way.

*“Strength without compassion is violence.  
Compassion without justice is weakness.  
Justice without love is Marxism.  
And love without justice is baloney!”*

## **A STORY**

It intrigued the congregation to see their rabbi disappear each week on the eve of the Sabbath. They suspected he was secretly meeting the Almighty, so they arranged for one of their number to follow him.

This is what the man saw: the rabbi disguised himself in peasant clothes and served a paralyzed Gentile woman in her cottage, cleaning out the room and preparing a Sabbath meal for her.

When the spy got back, the congregation asked, *“Where did the rabbi go? Did he ascend to heaven?”*

*“No,”* the man replied, *“he went even higher.”*

As we ascend the steps of the altar today to receive our Lord in Holy Communion, may we find in him the presence also of our brothers and sisters, especially the poor with whom he is one. May this Eucharist empower us to go even higher by loving them and one another as we love ourselves.