

## The Parent Commandment

- 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday  
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At the start of this academic year, when I spoke to the new students of Seattle University, I found myself saying to them that I will never again respond “It is complicated” when asked a question about why the university does or does not do something or when challenged on an issue. I had found that to say, “It is complicated” was usually a way for me to dismiss the question; or to indicate to the other person they were not knowledgeable enough, as I am, to understand the issue; or a way to avoid even trying to sort through the challenges from many angles; or to invite other people to bring their expertise to engage it. I realized then that I had been saying “It is complicated” all too frequently. I’ve caught myself a few times since the start of the year having it on the tip of my tongue. It is hard to avoid.

Jesus never said, “It is complicated.” In fact, he always said the opposite. For instance, in today’s gospel a scholar of the law approaches Jesus and asks him what among all several hundred commandments they both know and follow is the first, the most important. What he is really asking is if there is any way to cut through how complicated are the commandments and to find the “parent commandment”, that is the one commandment from which all of the others can be derived. Jesus accepts this as a genuine question from a genuine searcher. He does not respond to him with, “Well, it is complicated.” No, he gives him the answer.

Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength... (and) you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

There is the “parent commandment”, Jesus says, from which all else we should do is born, derived, deduced, flows, follows. Jesus does not say, “It is complicated.” Rather, he says “It is simple.” Jesus perceived that this scholar of the law, this genuine searcher who really wanted to know and to live according to what he knew, truly understood. He says to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God”, which probably means, you are not far from what God wants for you, because now that you understand, all that is left is to do it: love God with all you’ve got and love your neighbor as if your neighbor were you. “It is not complicated”... “It is simple”.

What is original on the part of Jesus in this “parent commandment” is that he makes love of God and love of others a single principle, brings them together from two into one from complicated into simple. This means we cannot really love God unless we love our neighbor and it also means we can’t really love others unless we love God. It also means in loving God we do love others; and in loving others we do love God. Be a genuine scholar of the law of Jesus for a moment and really hear and understand his answer to your genuine searching! You ask, “Jesus, is there one thing in my life I must do, one thing from which all else flows, one thing in which all else is included, one thing so that I don’t really have to worry about everything else?” Jesus answers, “Yes, it’s simple: love God with all you are and have got and

love others as if they were you; do this not as two things, but as one, each inherent in and necessary for the other.”

For Jesus there were not two realms of life: the religious realm and the social realm, the God realm and the realm of the world. They are undivided, dependent on one another; inseparable. “It is not complicated!” And they empower one another: love of God empowers loving others; loving others empowers loving God. It is not just that you can’t do one without the other but that doing one—loving God or the neighbor—enables us to genuinely really do the other.

Isn’t this our experience? When we open ourselves vulnerably and fully to God in prayer, don’t we find our hearts opened widely in compassion towards others? Don’t we also experience when we are really present to others in who they are in themselves and in their need—not for who they are for us—that our hearts are opened to God? Another way of saying this is that not only does faith serve justice, but also justice serves faith. We are called to uncomplicated, undivided, simple lives.

Let me give you three examples: 1) a Carmelite community that cannot love God unless the members love one another; 2) members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society who go into the homes of the poor and find their hearts opened to God; and 3) married couples who by loving one another love God, and by loving God love one another.

Who could this original unity of love of God and love of others in a single principle have come from but from Jesus? Everything we see of him in the gospels manifests this unity, his not only understanding but living this one commandment, the first commandment, this “parent commandment”, not a religious life and an other life, a religious love and an other love, but one love. He is the only one who in living this is not only not far from the kingdom of God, but is himself the kingdom of God. This is the heart of the gospel. If I am not mistaken, this is what Pope Francis is trying in all he does to teach, getting the gospel right, getting the commandments of the Christian life right, getting teaching which have been out of balance back into proper gospel perspective, focus, simplicity, balance. Pope Francis does not say, “It is complicated.” We have, after all, only one heart: the heart we open to God is the heart we open to others, and the heart we open to others is the heart we open to God. If we understand this, Jesus says to us, “You are not far from the kingdom of God. Just do it, and you are in the kingdom of God.” How good it is to know the “parent commandment” to guide the whole of our lives, the one that embraces all else. Let us allow the one who alone taught us this, himself to show us his way so that we might live out what we know from him and so be in the kingdom of God.