

Something worth noting, on this weekend, our Protestant sisters and brothers commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Today we realize that it is only through love that one day, we will all be like the Thessalonian community we hear about in the second reading, manifesting God's love and compassion toward all. On that day we will achieve Jesus' desire "that all might be one."

Today, we again find ourselves gathered together to give witness to the only thing that really matters to us as God's people – and our readings attest to this – that God is deeply in love with us.

And so, with that in mind, I thought it might be appropriate to have you all take part in a pre-test, a pop-quiz. In just a minute, the hospitality folks are going to pass out paper and pencil to each of you, and I want you, as quickly as possible, to write down the 10 commandments. Be sure to put your names on your papers, and then we'll collect them, and I'll look them over to see how you did. OK? Oh, and did I mention that in order to pass, you need to get all ten in proper order as they appear in Exodus Chapter 20.

Oh, and one more thing, your performance on this pop-quiz will determine whether or not you get into heaven. No pressure!

So, how are you feeling right now? Who's anxious? Show of hands.

Who's confident that they can get the commandments as they appear in the Book of the Law, the Torah? Show of hands. I'm not giving you a pop-quiz. You can breathe now. It would be a "gotcha" moment. I just wanted you to get a small taste of what was going on in Jesus' world.

So, what if I were a Jewish scholar of the Law, the Torah, and I asked you to list the 613 precepts of Jewish law? You might tremble! I could make it easier and ask you to list the proscriptions, the "thou shalt not's," the negative commandments; there are only 365 of them, one for every day of the year. Or, I could make it even easier and list only the prescriptions, the positive commandments, the "Thou shalt's"; there are only 248 of them, one for every bone in the human body.

For the Jews, all 613 of these commandments were binding. Some of them were "heavy" or very important; others were "less weighty" or slightly less important. None of them could be ignored. Enter in the Pharisees, who offered commentary and interpretations on all of the commandments, which made Jewish life even more complicated for the common man. I say common man because in the culture of the time, the bulk of the law pertained only to men. Women and children were property. And so, we hear in the first reading from Exodus 20, just 2 chapters before the 10 commandments, the Jewish law regarding the treatment of aliens, widows, and orphans. A widow was defined as woman whose husband had died and who had no children, and no other patriarchy on which she could rely.

She was "poor" in the sense that she had lost her social status, and it was her responsibility to make an effort to reclaim that status. A widow was to find another man to marry. An orphan, no parents and no kin to which he/she could attach, no legal guardian, was doomed to a life of begging, unless someone not their kin might take

them in. Aliens were not people passing through; they were resident aliens who might work with or for their Jewish neighbors. In the kinship society, they also had little-to-no rights. These three groups represent anyone who would find themselves vulnerable and on the fringes of society. And especially of aliens, God reminds the people that they were once aliens in a foreign land whom God saved through miraculous acts. God cautions the Israelites that he will hear any outcry from any of the vulnerable, “for I am compassionate.”

So, what about this pop-quiz that the lawyer springs on Jesus? I’ve mentioned before that this game of challenge and response was a common occurrence in Jesus’ time. The Pharisees were likely trying to see if Jesus could hold a candle to other famous contemporary teachers who could summarize the law. The basis of the question of the most important commandment was seeking clarification. And it seems that there was little agreement among them as they usually engaged this largely academic exercise. But the gospel is different, because the question comes with hostile motives of trying to dishonor Jesus. The setup was that whatever priority Jesus would proclaim, someone would likely step up and challenge him.

So how Jesus responds is at first not surprising. He is faithful to his Jewish faith and he turns to the Shema, the Jewish equivalent to our own Lord’s Prayer. *Shema Israel! Adonai Eloihenu, Adonai Ehad.* The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. It goes on: Therefore, you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home . . . Bind them at your wrist . . . a pendant on your forehead . . . Write them on the doorposts of your houses . . . The whole self is involved: heart . . . soul . . . strength. And to this Jesus adds mind, to clarify that we are to love God with all our being, holding nothing back.

This is the exultant proclamation of their Jewish faith. At no time are they to forget Israel’s love for God and God’s love for Israel. They are to pray this twice every day.

Jesus does manage to surprise the Pharisees, not so much with a second commandment but with a second face of the first commandment to love. He goes back to the Holiness Code in the Book of Leviticus: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** Jesus summarizes with one simple word: **love**; and two inseparable objects: **God and neighbor.**

While the Pharisees define neighbor as anyone who is part of family, village, kin or country, Jesus has gone on record as defining neighbor in its broadest terms: the Gentile Centurion, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Samaritan woman at the well, the Good Samaritan. He makes it clear to the legalistic Pharisees that God does not love only the righteous, as they have defined righteousness. God’s love extends to men and women who are sinners, those who are unworthy of divine love, those who cannot demand that love, who cannot earn that love on their own. No, we are beloved of God because God wants it that way. We are only able to love God because he loves us first.

In today's Gospel, Jesus doesn't give us anything radically new; he reframes elements of the law to challenge us to love more, love deeper.

But Jesus took the commandment of love even further, as we read on in the Gospels. He did offer us something new. At the Last Supper, he gave his disciples a "New Commandment: Love one another." Not "Love one another as you love yourselves." What was new about this commandment was "Love one another as I have loved you." This new commandment came to us in the context of the Last Supper, where Jesus proclaimed a New Covenant. This love of the new covenant should be our own new love.

The question before us today is: how should we live out this new *covenant love commandment* in the second decade of the 21st century? Will we focus on lists and precepts and commandments (which, in reality, are only guidelines as to how far we can go in sin before we're in too deep), or will we live by love.

We only have to look to the Thessalonians who showed they loved God by loving who God loves . . . they demonstrated love of God in the way they loved their neighbor. They were an example, far and wide. And as important as passing on the faith through teaching may be, the gospel is really handed down by example. This is the basis of discipleship that Fr. Patrick constantly puts before us.

More and more so-called religious groups are offering reasons to support nationalism, racism, and sexism. More and more, not just priests, deacons and lay ecclesial ministers, but all of us Catholics are going to be challenged by the rising tide of fundamentalist Christians in our country. We'll be put to the test like Jesus by the legal expert. We can write them off or ignore their trick questions, but they won't go away. Or, we can gently, lovingly treat them with the core answer of Jesus – Love of God; love of neighbor.

Who does God love? Us, of course! And all the rest of humanity. No exceptions, no asterisks, no if's, and's, or but's. We don't get to decide who's worthy of God's love.

How do **we** love God? By loving whoever God loves. When we can do this, we will recognize that the power of God can work within us to create something truly marvelous.