

31st Sunday
10/31/2021

THE ELEVATOR SPEECH

The past few years I learned a new expression: the elevator speech. To give an elevator speech is to give a brief description quickly, in the time it takes you to ride on an elevator. In Biblical times there were no elevators but they had a different expression: *standing on one foot*. Again, the idea is to be as succinct and quick as you can be.

In the gospel today, Jesus is asked to give an elevator speech. Jewish law held many commandments. This scribe asks Jesus which is the most important. Jesus answers with the prayer from the Old Testament known as the *Shema Yisrael*. Hear O Israel, this a prayer Jews would recite daily as a reminder of who God is and who they are called to be. But Jesus doesn't stop there. Again he quotes from the Old Testament about love of neighbor. It's been said that these form two sides of one coin; you could say that Jesus, while still keeping it brief, fuses these two commandments together to form what we sometimes call The Great Commandment or to use that more modern phrase, an Elevator Speech.

We're called to love God with all our being because God is the true absolute. Before God, everything else is relative and if we put something in place of God, it becomes an idol. An idol isn't just a graven image. It can be money, power, possessions, pleasure, sports, work or anything that takes the place of God. Idols may bring satisfaction and even pleasure but because they are relative, they are limited and they cannot satisfy that hunger for the absolute that is within us. They can't fill that God shaped hole within our hearts.

We're called to love, we're commanded to love because God is love, generous, self-gifting love and to love, to truly love, is to be godlike, it's to be holy. It is as scribe says, *it is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices*. Worship without love of God and neighbor, without justice and charity, as the prophets reminded people then and now, quickly becomes empty ritual and even something dangerous that can draw us away from God rather than towards God. And this whole conversation takes place in the temple. The place where sacrifice was offered to God.

Jesus makes it clear that we're commanded to love God and to love our neighbor. This isn't a suggestion but a commandment. If we're to share in the life and love of God in heaven we have to do both.

What does it mean to love? Love isn't a feeling but a decision. Feelings are feelings and they may be enjoyable or painful but love is a decision. Love is a decision to seek the highest good for the one you love. It's to be willing to suffer for the one you love and to make a sincere gift of one's self. And the greatest example of this is Jesus on the cross. Through his cross and resurrection, Jesus reveals to us the radical depths of God's love. We grow in love of God through worshiping God in spirit and in truth, by lives of faith, hope and love, with justice and charity, through daily prayer, through his word and through the sacraments.

As always, it's important to pay attention to what Jesus says but it's also important to pay attention to what Jesus does *not* say. Jesus never tells us to love humanity but our neighbor; that person who sits behind you at Mass and sings off key, the person who drives too slowly when you're in a hurry; that person who has the unique gift of getting on your nerves. And the hope is that others will love us because we all have the capacity to be an irritating neighbor to them.

Not only that, Jesus never says we have to like our neighbor. We can try to like our neighbor but we will hit it off with some people and not others. We don't have to like our neighbor but we are called to love our neighbor, and not just to love our neighbor but to love our neighbor *as ourselves*. That means that we're called to love ourselves and care for ourselves. We're made in the image and likeness of God and God loves us so we're called to an *appropriate*, notice that word appropriate, love of self always striving to love God and our neighbor more. This isn't to be selfish but so that we can live life generously and lovingly.

To love our neighbor means to honor life, and work for justice and charity. It's to honor each and every human life as a unique and unrepeatable gift of God, made in God's image and likeness. Biblically, justice means living in right relationship with God and neighbor, and as Christians, we would say that everyone is our neighbor. But we're not called to stop at justice but to show charity, to love. If you really love someone, you will love those that your beloved loves. If you love your spouse, you will love, or at least try to love, your in-laws because your spouse loves them.

If you love God, you will love those God loves, and if God loves us, that means God loves our neighbor, and we're to love our neighbor as ourselves but also as God loves. We love our neighbor in God so we might love rightly. And we love God in our neighbor, made in the image and likeness of God, particularly in the poor and those in need. Think of Jesus' words, *I was hungry and you gave me to eat*. Or as St. John tells us, *Whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen*.

When Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, that includes the born and unborn, the healthy and the sick, the young and the old, the native and the foreigner, the good and even the bad. Abortion, euthanasia, oppressing the stranger and vulnerable, economic injustice, capital punishment, human trafficking, even disregard for the environment are offenses against God and our neighbor. In the end, every sin is a failure to love God and our neighbor.

Jesus ushered in a new age, taking the commands of loving God and neighbor to a deeper level. Now, sacrifice is offered to God not in the temple but here at the Eucharist. Here in the Eucharist, we enter into the hour of the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus that we hear of in the second reading, offering ourselves up to God the Father with him. Here Jesus nourishes us with his word and the gift of his very self, with his body, blood, soul and divinity under the form and bread and wine so that we can grow in love of God and love of neighbor. Here, we're reminded of who God is and who we are in God.

We too, can fall into the trap of separating our worship from our love of God and love of neighbor and to protect against this trap we strive to live lives of intentional faith and intentional love

Loving God with all our being and loving our neighbor as ourselves. That's Jesus' elevator speech. May it be ours as well