

**FR. JOHN'S HOMILY**  
**Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 31, 2021**

Bishop Robert Barron, Word on Fire, loves to play golf. He tells this story often about the great golfer Jack Nickolas. Every year after the season was over, Jack took some time off to be with his family. When it was time to start the golfing season again, he called his training coach and they got to work. He began at the beginning, teach me like I have never played golf before. The basics, the hands, the stance, the turn, the swing, only after he had this down, then he would move on the particular golf shots. Jack knew that no matter how great a golfer he was, if he didn't have the foundation down, he would not be successful.

It is easy to see how this applies to our faith, our relationship with God. If we don't have the foundation of our faith down, it doesn't matter what else we do. We will not be fruitful. The basic foundation of our faith is very simple: love God and love others. This is what we hear today in our readings.

Another way of introducing our readings is reminding us of a quote that originated from William Blake, an English poet from the 1700's. He wrote this poem: "I sought my God and my God I couldn't find; I sought my soul and my soul eluded me; I sought to serve my brother in his need, and I found all three; My God, my soul, and thee." It has been adapted over time, and many have heard it quoted this way: I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see. I sought my God but my God eluded me. I sought my neighbor and I found all three.

Loving God and our neighbor gets us very close to God and His kingdom. We hear in Deuteronomy, the great commandment: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might," (chapter 6, verse 5). This is the first and greatest commandment.

It was so vital and important to the Jews that it is the Shema prayer. Every Jew from an early age learns this prayer. It is kept on their doorpost and gates, in the Mezuzah. They would touch it each time they would enter and leave their homes. Very similar to our Catholic tradition of marking our self with the sign of the holy water entering and leaving church.

The Shema prayer is the basic prayer of loving God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. When the Orthodox Jews go to pray, they even put it on their foreheads and left wrist, called phylacteries. Reminding them to keep God's words in their mind and in their heart, as they prepare themselves for prayer. It is still their practice today and is fascinating to see.

When this scribe, a faithful observant of the Jewish law comes to Jesus today, he asks sincerely what is the greatest of all the commandments. Jesus answered with the very words from the Book of Deuteronomy familiar to the scribe and any devout Jew: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." However, Jesus didn't end there and he went on to add, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," which Jesus and every faithful Jew would have known in the Book of Leviticus (chapter 19, verse 18). Jesus united the two as the greatest commandment.

The scribe must have been struck that Jesus simply quoted the basic foundation of the law, and teachings that had been handed down through the centuries. The basis of it all, and

fundamental to Jesus' teaching as well, is love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus upheld these precepts and fulfilled them perfectly as true God and true man.

The preaching of Jesus underlined the love of God and love of neighbor as united; one flowing from the other and back again to the other. It is impossible truly to love God if one does not love one's neighbor, those with whom we live and interact each day. The clear reply of Jesus to the scribe underscores the simplicity on one level, yet great challenge on another level, of really carrying out the law of love of God and love of neighbor.

There is no greater commandments than these; the scribe would respond. The Lord then told the scribe, "You are not far from the kingdom of God. When we put into practice the basic foundation of our faith, we too are not far from the kingdom of God.

To be faithful to Christ in our daily life, our religion needs to be rooted in a commitment to the basic foundation of loving God and our neighbor. That basic commitment once again is love of God and love of neighbor, even when it's challenging, and not convenient. True religion, according to the teaching of Jesus, is living in love to the fullest, without self-centered interest or trying to use others for any reason. Living this basic commandment of love again gets us close to the Kingdom of God. Love of God asks of us a personal relationship with God, and as our relationship with God grows then this love must reach out toward others.

Our love for God must overflow to the love of neighbor, always and everywhere. The apostle John said, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and at the same time hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. Likewise, if one does not love his brother whom he sees, cannot love God whom he cannot see." John 4:20.

There are hundreds of opportunities every day to show our love: at home, at work, on the street, in school, in church, out shopping, on sports field, wherever we may be. We are to show ourselves as followers of God by our patience, kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, suffering with patience, and dealing with the shortcoming of others. There are more qualities and virtues but this only happens when our foundation of faith is set.

I would like to end with this true story that happened to me back in 1995. It was shortly after my Dad's death, and I was emotionally struggling. Still grieving his loss, I found myself tearing up at Mass and on other occasions like during TV commercials, fishing, seeing a Father and son together, etc. I was helping out at a retreat at Marylake and saw the late Fr. Everest, who was elderly and a very holy priest. I got to visit with him briefly after lunch. Our encounter lasted 5 minutes, but I have never forgotten it. I shared very briefly my feelings and emotions of losing Dad. He simply, slapped his fist on his other hand, and said, "John do you have this?" I said mimicking his gesture, "What is this, Father?" He replied, "Faith, do you have Faith?" I said, "Yes Father." He gets up, places his hand on my head and said, "You are going to be alright, Son." And he walks away. Leaving me there with my fist in my hand. "Do I have this? Yes, then I am going to be okay."

If you have this, Faith, loving God and your neighbor, you too are going to be alright. Let's ask the Lord today to give the grace to love him with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And not only will we be alright, but we will also be close to the Kingdom of God.