

31 Ord, Sunday B
Deuteronomy 6:2-6; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34
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Notre Dame Church (Michigan City, IN)
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In the 1950s and '60s, much of Catholic religious instruction involved memorization. Central to memorization were prayers. First of all were the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be. Next, the Hail Holy Queen and the Memorare. In the second grade, we learned the Act of Contrition before our first confession. We learned to pray the Angelus three times a day when the church bells rang at morning, noon, and evening. We learned the grace before and after meals. As the years went on we memorized the Act of Faith, the Act of Hope, and the Act of Love. As we approached the celebration of Confirmation, we memorized the Prayer to the Holy Spirit. All of these prayers and others were printed on the back pages of our religion books. Many of these prayers faded from our memories through disuse as the years went by. Perhaps these prayers, learned by rote, were not always prayed from the heart. But I remember one nun wisely saying that troubles, crises, tragedies, and other frightening things will occur in our lives when we can't find the words to pray. In such times, a Hail Mary or an aspiration such as "Jesus, Mary, Joseph" can be a source of comfort and strength.

Ideally, we would like all of our prayers and our interpersonal relationships to be as authentic as possible, filled with love, hope, joy, and sincerity. The central prayer of Judaism was recited twice in today's readings. It is called the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Therefore you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." Unfortunately, the text from Deuteronomy stops just as Moses offers practical advice about the prayer: "Keep repeating them to your children. Recite them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them on your arm as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead... so that you, your child, and your grandchild, may fear the Lord, your God, by keeping, as long as you live, all his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you, and thus have long life."

In today's gospel passage, Jesus echoes these words of Moses. But then he adds a second commandment that is also found in the Hebrew Scriptures: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This command is found in the book of Leviticus. But it is not to suggest that we should love people who are only like ourselves. Leviticus goes on to say (and Jesus' audience thoroughly knew their scriptures): "When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself"(19:33-34).

The love Jesus preached is not an easy love—whether directed at God or at the other. It is not gushy, sweet, and sentimental. It is not romantic or something we easily fall into like teenagers. It cannot be easy if it demands "all our heart, all our understanding, and all our strength."

The saints would readily assure us of this. The apostles, for example, did not love God with all their understanding until they were anointed with the Holy Spirit. The tortures endured by the martyrs demanded all their strength. Many saints, such as St. Teresa of Calcutta could only love God with all their heart through the darkness of faith. Her journals reveal a lifetime of experiencing Jesus' absence.

The love of neighbor is likewise challenging. Responding to family squabbles, long-held grudges, jealousy, family estate disputes, road rage warriors, and countless other daily or chronic conflicts test our ability to love and forgive sincerely. Overcoming fear or resentment toward people who look different from us, who worship differently, or who take illegal and desperate steps to gain asylum is not easy. Jesus never suggest that love of God and neighbor is easy.

Authentic, divinely inspired love will always demand sacrifice—sacrifice of comfort, sacrifice of our conventional ways of thinking, and sacrifice of our feelings of self-entitlement.

How providential it is that today's readings about love occur two days before mid-term elections. Citizenship demands that we take up our hard-won opportunity and responsibility to vote. But faith tells us that the decisions we make on Tuesday are not just opinions, but moral decisions. Jesus tells us that we are baptized people whose responsibility is to the poor, the weak, the children, and to the future of this planet. We American citizens are abundantly blessed. This is all

the more reason we have no right to make life harder or shorter for others who share this world, or perhaps impossible for generations that will follow us.