

Father O'Connor's Homily for 31 October 2021  
Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

Deuteronomy 6: 2-6  
Hebrews 7: 23-28  
Mark 12: 28b-34

*This week in the mail you will be receiving some information about our diocesan “Heart of a Shepherd Campaign” that is now taking place in Saint Joseph Parish and in Nativity Parish.*

*As I have mentioned to you, this campaign has four purposes: 1) to strengthen our seminaries and our seminarians, 2) to care for our retired priests by fully-funding our Priest Pension Fund, 3) to assist our newly-ordained priests with their education debts, and 4) to strengthen our parishes, namely Saint Joseph and Nativity, in replacing our leaking church roofs.*

*With this mailing is a letter from me about the campaign and a suggested gift amount that can be payable over three years. Now, I don't know anyone's financial circumstances. These amounts are really guess-work, based largely on someone's past generosity.*

*The suggested amount might be just right for you. It might be too low, and you may want to take it higher. It might be way too high. And if that is the case, please feel flattered that I thought that you had it to give!*

*On our parishes' website homepage, there are some short videos that you can watch: one that I did, one that our seminarian Nathan Frankart did, and one that our Diocese did about this “Heart of a Shepherd Campaign.” I encourage you to take a look at them.*

*I also encourage you to talk about this campaign at home, and to pray about the decision that you are able to make. We will have a Commitment Sunday for our two parishes on the weekend of 20-21 November. But if have made your decision before then, “Heart of a Shepherd” commitment cards are welcome anytime.*

*Thank you so much.*

“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. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today” [Deuteronomy 6: 4-6].

So proclaims Moses in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy which Jesus quotes in today's Gospel. And then Jesus adds from the book of Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Leviticus 19: 18]. Then Jesus concludes: "There is no other commandment greater than these."

When does the door to this kind of love begin to open?

Writer Kathleen Norris tells about a man named Willie who had fallen in with a drug dealer. Willie thought things were working out just fine – setting up a network of drug contacts and making some quick big bucks.

But one day he and the dealer were cruising down the street when they spotted a man coming towards them. "I need to kill him," the drug dealer said as he reached for his gun.

"It was right then and there that I decided to get out," said Willie, badly shaken. "I was in way over my head."

And that, concluded Kathleen Norris, is when the door to love and salvation begins to open – with the sudden awareness that a particular path is leading to no good, and then wanting to do whatever it takes to get on the right one.

Stories of the saints – like Saint Paul and his conversion – highlight such an awareness. At one point the saints heard today's Gospel as if for the first time, and they embraced the truth that love of God and love of neighbor are the real directives for our living. They humbly realized that they had far to go – and that God was there to help them. The saints show us that becoming a disciple of Jesus is a graced, patient, lifelong process.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner points out, "When people ask me, 'Where is God?' I tell them that I would rather re-phrase the question to 'When is God?'"

After all, God is love – and we most often recognize that God is present when we love God and when we love our neighbor.

As in this story. A woman in great distress asked: "Why does God seem so far away from me? If only I could feel Him touch me."

Her friend said to her: "Pray to God and ask Him to touch you."

So she closed her eyes and began to pray. And then she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. "He touched me!" she said, with her eyes still closed. Then she opened her eyes and said, "You know, it felt just like your hand."

Her friend replied: “Of course it did. It was my hand. Do you think God would need to stretch out a long arm all the way from heaven just to touch you? Mine was closer, so He used me.”

Where is God? When is God? God is love. God is here.

Like the story of the woman who was working on her master’s degree and commuted several times each week to the university. Coming home late at night, she would see an old man by the side of the road. He was always there, no matter what the weather, no matter how late she returned. She often wondered what brought him to the same spot every night.

She finally asked her neighbor: “Have you ever seen an old man on the side of the road late at night?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “Many times.”

“Is he a little touched upstairs? Doesn’t he ever go home?”

“No more touched than you and I are,” her neighbor said. “And he does go home right after you do. You see, he doesn’t like you driving by yourself late at night on these back roads. So he goes out to wait for you. When he sees your tail lights disappear around the bend, and knows that you are safe, then he goes home.”

To love God and to love our neighbor: “There is no other commandment greater than these,” Jesus says.

Love is not something over and above our daily life. Love is the very heart of our daily life.

Love is the springboard for our actions, the basis for our decisions, the grounding of our prayer life, the motivation for our careers, the very purpose we are here in the first place.

God is love. I suspect that when people wonder where God is, it is because they have not consciously experienced when God is. The Gospel invites us to reach out to them as the loving hand of God ...and show them: God is love. God is here. And the door to this love is wide open.