

Once an American journalist visited Kolkata, India to see the works of St. Mother Teresa. He went to the for the dying and destitute, the very first house she opened next to a Hindu temple called Kali-ghat Temple. The journalist watched Mother Teresa dressing the wounds of a man with gangrene in his leg. The journalist was appalled by the very sight and smell of the wound. He said to mother Teresa, **“I wouldn’t do that for one million Dollars”**. **“Neither would I,”** said the Nun, **“I do it for love of God.”**

This is a very concrete example of how love of God is expressed in love of neighbor in action.

This is the central theme of today’s readings which highlights the greatest of all the commandments in the Bible, namely to love God and express it in action by loving Him in our neighbors.

In the first reading of today taken from the Book of Exodus tells us of the loving relationship that the Israelites ought to have towards those under-privileged. The under-privileged were the aliens or the immigrants, those who were forced to leave their homes because of circumstances such as wars, plagues or famines. The Lord reminds the Israelites that once they too were as aliens while living in Egypt. Now, their Laws command them to be warm and helpful to those who are less fortunate as they themselves once were less fortunate. Just as God protected them and treated them kindly, so they are to protect others and treat them with kindness. They are reminded once again of their loving obligation to take care of the needs of the widows and the orphans. God wanted the needs of these aliens and poor be looked after by those who were more fortunate. Otherwise their cries will reach out to Heaven and God would hear them and His anger would punish the aggressors. Their families would suffer the same consequences, their wives becoming widows and their children become orphans.

In answering the question about the most important commandment in the law, Jesus picks two commandments out of more than 600 commandments altogether. The first commandment he picks is from the book of Deuteronomy about loving with one’s “whole heart, whole soul, whole mind, and whole strength”. It is part of Shema prayer which is very integral part of Jewish rituals and which is the first prayer a Jewish child learns. The second commandment Jesus picks is from the book of Leviticus about loving one’s neighbor as one’s own self. For Jesus, these two commandments are inseparably related to each other. Love of God and love of the neighbors are two aspects of the same love, not two different kinds of love. They complement each other. Absence of the love of the neighbor means absence of the love of God too.

Here we find the answer to a very natural question: How can you love God whom you have not seen, heard or touched? How can you relate yourself to God who is in his heavenly abode, far away from the world? Jesus bridges the apparent gap between God and the world through the commandment of love.

The message of today's Gospel is loud and clear: Love is the greatest of all commandments and loving fellow human beings is as important as loving God.

Almost all the religions in the world teach about love of God and love of neighbor. So, what is new in Christianity? Other religions separate these two commandments. Even Jews had these two commandments completely separate.

This constant tendency to separate the love of God from the love of the neighbor has done great harm to peace and harmony in the world. Religious fanatics have made a mockery of God by carrying swords and guns to defend his name. The incident of 9/11 is one clear example- killing so many human beings in the name of God. We can see such examples even in India. Human beings are killed in the name of Holy cows. So, for these religions love of God is separate from love of neighbor. They think they can kill others in the name of God.

Jesus combines both the commandments into one. This is the newness in Jesus's teaching about love. Jesus strongly emphasizes the fact that love of our neighbor is an essential part of our obligation towards God. If we fail in this we fail in our love for God, for we refuse to carry out this sacred duty. If we fail to recognize our neighbor as our brother, we fail to recognize God as our Father and we do not love him. Love of God and love of neighbor must motivate and guide everything a Christian says and does.

So, it is neither the cross you wear nor the creed you recite that determines your identity as a Christian, but love and service you render to others. Charity, love of the neighbor is, therefore, the characteristic mark of Christian spirituality.

This year's CSA appeal gives you one very concrete chance to practice your love of god by sharing financial resources with others.

Remember Love is a verb.