15th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Cycle C

July 13/14, 2013

Dt 30: 10-14; Col 1: 15-20; Lk 10: 25-37

I want to begin by quoting Pope Francis, who said the following on July 8th of this year on the island of Lampedusa, Italy:

**“Today no one in our world feels responsible; we have lost a sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters. We have fallen into the hypocrisy of the priest and the levite whom Jesus described in the parable of the Good Samaritan: we see our brother half dead on the side of the road, and perhaps we say to ourselves: "poor soul…!", and then go on our way. It’s not our responsibility, and with that we feel reassured, assuaged. The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference. In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn’t affect me; it doesn’t concern me; it’s none of my business!*” Pope Francis, July 8, 2013***

***Who is my neighbor?***

Our faith is a very demanding faith. Our Catholic religion sets high standards. Just think of it. We must go to Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation. We must always tell the truth and respect other’s property. We must protect every human life. We must be willing to die for our faith. Marriage can only be between a man and a woman. We must become a son or daughter of God. We must live as Jesus Christ himself lived. We must go out and transform the world. We must give our entire life to God.

Yes, these are some of the demands of our faith. We are supposed to live up to them. Thank God for his mercy and forgiveness, because we all fail in living up to these demands, don’t we?

Today, in the Gospel of the Good Samaritan, as our Holy Father reminds us, we are faced with another very demanding aspect of our faith: ***We must love God with all our souls, with all our minds, with all our strength, with all our being; and we must love our neighbor as*** ***ourselves***.

Yes, it seems impossible, doesn’t it? How in the world could our faith demand this from us too, in addition to all the other demanding aspects of Christianity?

Thank God for his mercy and his strength!.

I would like to focus today on the question posed by the man in the Gospel, “Who is my neighbor?” This question demands an answer.

Back when I was studying theology in Rome, and then in my classes during diaconate formation as well as in my private studies, I learned that the Scripture scholars speak of a basic theological principle that our Lord was teaching in this parable, i.e., the *subject of love* is defined, but the *object of love* cannot be defined. What does that mean?

Said plainly, we know who it is who is to do the loving: you, and you, and you, and you, and me. Each of us who have been baptized into Jesus Christ must love our neighbor. This is clearly defined. What we don’t know is who will be the object of our love, in other words, who we must love today, because no one is excluded from the list of possibilities. We cannot predict who our neighbor will be, because it could include anyone.

Who is ***your*** neighbor? Your husband? Your wife? Your children? The person next door? The people in the nursing home? The person who is from the other political party? The atheist? The public sinner? The person who mistreated you in your childhood? What about the terrorist who has killed and maimed others? How about Al Qaeda? What about all those people in our prisons? What about that homeless person you saw yesterday?

How can we possibly love these people? Only by God’s grace and mercy. Only if we can overcome our **fear** of loving. Only if we can overcome the unloving mindset of the world in which we live. Only if we allow God to work through us.

When we see the sinner, or the atheist, or politicians and others who advocate an immoral agenda, or terrorists and madmen we want to call them “evil” and we want to distant ourselves from them, to not touch them in any way if we can avoid it. We have to overcome this way of thinking if we are to love our neighbor.

A lot of us fall into a trap in thinking that out there is a great battle going on between God and Evil, as if two beings were competing and fighting to see who wins. No, it isn’t that way at all. God exists, and evil is simply the absence of God in a place or in the life of a person. That is a theological fact. Satan has been completely destroyed by Jesus Christ. We really have nothing to fear when it comes to loving our neighbor.

Just as cold is only the absence of heat – and that is a fact of physics – and darkness is only the absence of light, so too evil is simply the absence of God. Yes, Satan exists, and he wields power, but he has been definitively defeated by Jesus Christ.

So, do not fear, for God has conquered evil, and has given us the truth, and has cast light into the darkest of places.

So when we meet someone who is far from God, we must bring God to him. When we meet someone who is “wrong” or living in darkness, we must bring God’s truth and light to him. It is God’s work that we do, not ours. He does the work, we just hand him on to those who need him. We do that by how we live and speak. That is our vocation, to bring light, truth and goodness – to bring God – to our neighbor.

To those who have shut him out, we must crack open the door.

To those who have dimmed the light of faith, we must light a lamp.

To those who live in error, we must speak the truth.

To those who would hate, we must bring God’s love.

Our faith, our religion, ***is*** a demanding faith. We cannot deceive ourselves or excuse ourselves by making it is easy or dumbing it down. *We must love our neighbor as ourselves*. We never know for sure who that neighbor will be on any particular day, but we know without a doubt that ***we are*** ***to be the people*** ***who must love him or her today.***

Do not fear the demands of our faith, for it is always all about God in the end. It is God’s work we do, not our own. It is God’s grace and our cooperation with that grace that wins the day. Nothing is impossible with God.

Fear not to live out fully the teachings and the demands of our Catholic faith! Open wide your hearts to Jesus and remain attached to the Catholic Church, and God will work wonders with your life!