

The Greatest Commandment

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Readings: Deuteronomy 6:2-6, Psalms 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 57, Hebrews 7:23-28, Mark 12:28-34

Tonight's readings are about fundamental questions and about going back to the basics.

So I thought I would also ask some very basic questions... Why are we here at Dignity tonight? And why do we persevere in our Christian faith?

An answer I hear a lot is that we come to Dignity because of the community. And of course it's true. I think that this is exactly what Jesus is referring to when he says: "love your neighbor as yourself". He is telling us to build strong and loving communities, just like Dignity.

However, there is another fundamental reason why we are here at Dignity -- I think -- which is not separable from the love for our community. To say it in Jesus' words:

You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your mind
and with all your strength.

I feel like we don't think about this part enough sometimes. Part of the reason, I think, is that it's a very puzzling commandment. What does it really mean to love God? Also... is love something that we can really control? Can we force ourselves to love God?

So -- I took to the Internet trying to answer this question and -- I found out ... that there is a lot of confusion on the topic.

Really a lot of people seem to think that loving God is the same thing as obeying all the commandments and remaining pure from sin. This is important, but I think we can do a lot better than this. The Bible does say -- in many places -- those who truly love God will follow God's commandments -- but we also just heard in tonight's Gospel that

To love God with all your heart
and with all your understanding and strength
and to love your neighbor as yourself
is far more important than any burnt offering or sacrifice

Often I think the rules that churches and pastors ask us to follow are more like burnt offerings and sacrifices than acts of love. The main problem, I think, is that if our efforts to follow the commandments are grounded in fear of punishment rather than in the love for God, then perhaps they are not that valuable.

Basically, if you go to church every Sunday just because you're afraid of going to hell, does it mean you love God or are you just afraid?

So I searched some more. What does it really mean to love God?

An answer that I liked a lot more is this: loving God is about loving your neighbor. Even Dorothy Day wrote about this.

“a terrifying thought” she writes
“we only love God as much as the person that we love the least”.

This is actually a great exercise. Try to think, and I know we talk about this sometimes, who is the person that I love the least? I am sure we can all come up with some pretty good candidates. Well, Dorothy Day is saying, you only love God as much as you love this person.

If you really want to love God, you have to go find that person that you love the least -- and love them! Just like Jesus, who dying on the cross asked the Father to forgive the very people who were crucifying him, we are called to love our enemies -- and this is what it means to love God.

But, actually, I think there is more still to loving God. Jesus says that the second greatest commandment, to love your neighbor, is similar to the first, similar but not the same! There is love towards God and there is love towards neighbor. They complement each other, they help each other, they cannot exist without each other, but they are not the same!

I think there is a third really important idea to at least mention. And this is about feeling the presence of God and speaking to God in your heart. In this sense loving God is to pray and spend time with God. Get to know God personally. And this is also a really important way of loving God.

But there is a fourth way that I would like to talk about.

As some of you know, I have been working with a lot of researchers in the last few years. If I've learned something about research -- it's always very daunting and you never know whether it's going to pan out.

In research, we set in front of ourselves insane challenges, like building artificial intelligence, or curing cancer, or traveling in space, or solving poverty, or saving the environment. Crazy stuff... Every time, the challenge seems nearly impossible to overcome -- In a way, we are actively going to a place where everyone else before us has failed, and yet we still hope to succeed.

So I would like to propose to you this -- perhaps loving God is like a research question.

Getting to know God, or, in other words, theology, is perhaps the greatest research challenge that humanity has ever faced, spanning the entire history of Christianity, and even the history of Jewish religion before us. And the reason theology is hard is because it requires us to transcend our understanding of the world and of ourselves, more than any other research question. Just because it's difficult however, it doesn't mean that we should give up. I really believe there are great saints to come in the future, great theological discoveries waiting for us in the future, that will significantly impact humanity, just like theology and religion have already deeply impacted our world in the past.

Loving God is a bit like space travel, we are doing a little of it, but we are not likely to reach the edges of our galaxy within our lifetimes. Similarly, in theology, we have small probes and satellites that are peeking into the loving nature of God, but we can still dream of a day where we will have a much greater understanding of our creator.

But unlike space travel, where only select few can participate, I think we are all called to take part in the research about God. Because, I think, that's how we are created, it is only through searching for God, striving to love God fully that we find meaning in our life, however this search manifests in our life.

So here it is, I think this is the answer...Why are we here at Dignity tonight? Why do we persevere in the Christian faith?

I think we are Christian and we are here because we do love God, and we come here to perfect this love, to share our search for the God we love. Look around and rejoice. The God we are searching for is here with us, even though we can't fully understand God's presence. Let us share our love for God with each other and continue our joyful search together.