

“Keep It Simple!”

Homily of October 23, 2005

by Fr. Michael Dibble

Some Sundays when we are together at Mass I've told you about Damien. He was a freshman in religion class in high school, a freshman in religion class. And Damien, almost from the beginning, would put up his hand, when we would have some kind of discussion about Catholic doctrine or morality. Damien would wave his hand. I can see him now. And he would say, "What did Jesus say? What did Jesus say?" At first, I recoiled, thinking that some rabid fundamentalist had inserted this child. (Isn't that silly of a Catholic priest, to be alarmed because a kid wants to know "What did Jesus say?")

Well, as far as today's gospel goes, the scholars agree what Jesus said. It's called the gospel of the Great Commandment. And, because you and I have heard it so often, we tend to take it for granted. But Our Lord's audience did not, as we are going to see in a minute. Many of them must have been somewhat stunned! He put it so simply, and Our Lord adds, "All the laws and all the prophets, they depend on those two things. Love God. Love your neighbor the way you love yourself." Now, the acronym for today, which I've spared you for awhile, the acronym for today is R E A L, as in "Get real!" Real, about the way we love God, the way he loves us and the way we try to love each other.

The first kind is RIGID, a rigid way of loving God. And I am afraid that many of the Pharisees with whom Our Lord came in contact had a very rigid approach to law and love. In addition to the Ten Commandments, by the time Our Lord was born and began to teach, the Pharisees had, according to the scholars, more than six hundred other laws. And the Pharisees would openly debate which were more important, as in our mortal or venial sins. But you had to observe all of them, commandments and the over six hundred laws. They were of equal merit. And that is why the audience listening today to Our Lord must "oh-h-h...." "What did Jesus say?" Damien used to ask all that freshman year, and, in a sense, today what Our Lord is saying to them and to you and to me is "Keep it simple!" Keep it simple. You will collapse under the rigidity of over six hundred other laws, the meaning of which and the value of which even the Pharisees cannot agree on. It's too rigid!

Second, EMOTIONAL. And for our purposes today, I am using the word "emotional" in a pejorative way. Emotions are wonderful. They are great, but Our Lord in teaching us today, doesn't want us to depend on emotional love. We can't. We can't maintain emotion at that peak. And many of you here at this Mass, good-hearted as you are, maybe your emotions are not much into it. "I'm tired".... You walk in and "Uh, him again talking! Oh, my" The emotions have

to be, in a sense, subsided so that you can make a will act. It's a matter of will. Let me give a quick example. (I have three quick examples.) They are all repeats, but I always hope some of you haven't been here before so I can get away with it. The first example about love of God, our love of God, being based on emotion isn't so good. I used to come out here to the Seminary in Menlo Park on my summer vacations from teaching, and I used to love it there. Every morning on my three week vacation, I would come to a store in Menlo Park on the main street. It was a coffee shop. And I would get coffee and I would sit on the bench, and I would snoopervise all the people coming and going. And there was one man, every morning. For these three weeks, every day this guy would come. He looked like a very amiable, genial man. He had two dogs with him. One was a terrier and the other was a spaniel. Same routine every day, and he would tie up the two dogs. There was kind of a fence there, a wooden fence, and he would tie the two dogs up and he would pat them on the heads and he would go in for coffee. He would be gone about forty minutes. Every morning, the two dogs went into the same routine. The terrier began to jump up and down nervously and yip and yap and crane his head if he could see through the glass window of the coffee shop and whirl around with the leash and get it all tangled.... so nervous, so agitated, so unhappy. The spaniel would glance around with a kind of imperial grandeur, insinuate himself onto the pavement, check things out, including me, and just be peaceful.

Some of us, to whom Our Lord speaks rather often, I think in our way of loving God or trusting God or hoping about God are like the terrier. We know he is in the coffee shop. We know he cares. He loves. He will be back. But we are torn by emotions, of fear and anxiety and doubt, doubt, doubt. The doubt isn't a sin. It's a human reaction to fear and threat. That's why, "What did Jesus say?...." Damien, Our Lord said "Love God with all your heart and mind and soul." That means, to the Jewish ear, that trilogy simply means you make a decision. It doesn't mean emotionality or intellectuality. You make a decision. That's what that trilogy means to a Jewish person. Heart, mind, you make a decision, as you made a decision, despite your feelings in many cases, to come to see Christ today at the Mass. That's what he meant. And the Jews knew it, and some of the Pharisees were probably, "Oh!!!"

The third is ACCEPTING, accepting, even accepting, loving yourself. There is a guy who drives me shopping sometimes. He's not a Catholic but he comes to this Mass now and then. He loves this church. And he was driving me shopping on Monday and he said, "Well, what's the sermon about Sunday?" I said, "It's about Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself." And there was a long pause, in literature called a "pregnant pause." And he said, "Oh, wow! Some of the people I know, I don't want them to love me the way they love themselves. Some of them don't even like themselves. They are always all wound up with putting themselves down and despising themselves for trying to please everybody when they really shouldn't always say no. Terrible, terrible self dislike! Please," he said, "Don't let these people love me the way they love themselves."

Now, this is not an "I'm OK. You're OK. Self-help" thing. It comes from Christ, "...as you love yourself." And I think often of those poor guys on Wall Street I often talk about, their tormented

faces, no matter how much money they were worth, workaholics, drinking too much, yelling when they get home. They are so stressed out. There was one man in the parish, in upstate New York, forty-five years ago, what we call a “good solid Catholic,” a cliché, but he was. But he didn’t like himself. He suffered a lot. And one day he told me.... (Now this guy was not given to hallucinations, nor to the histrionics that I’m given to. He was very kind of stolid, inner directed.) and one day things had been going so bad at IBM, business worries, he had three kids all hitting adolescence at this time, which has its own headaches, heartaches. And when he was a kid his father always told him he was a loser, “You’re a loser. Are those the best grades you can get?” For years, his old man was constantly putting him down. “What a loser!” And he’s there, shaving, on this particular day, forty-five years ago and all of a sudden, all those years of self-detestation exploded and, as he was brushing his teeth, he expectorated the toothpaste on the mirror and then he heard this, (Now remember he was not given to dramatics, and he told me forty-five years ago and I got his permission to tell....) he heard a voice, as clear as a chime, “Don’t do that. Stop that. You are loved by me.” The voice was Christ. And you know what he meant when he said he heard a voice. It was this overwhelming, but undeniable, transcendent consciousness. “Stop that. Don’t do that, spitting at yourself. You are loved by me, not as an aggregate, not as a believer, YOU.” Let’s call him “John.” “I love you, John, right to the roots of your being, through all your faults and failures and self-hate, I....” Later, he picked up enough spiritual literature to find out, Theresa of Avila and others, the evil one aches to get you to hate yourself because if you hate yourself, you cannot possibly love the Lord or your neighbor.

What did Jesus say? Our Lord said, remember the night before he died he said it? “Behold I am with you all days...” Don’t think of that as something said to the aggregate of the Catholic Church or just the apostles. He said it to you and Father and me. “I am with you all days. Stop that. Don’t do that. You are loved by me.” That’s what he said.

And finally, LITTLE, a little love, a little bit of love for our neighbors ... a little bit. You and I, we can’t solve warfare. We can’t eliminate cancer. We can’t eliminate the personalities of people who just chafe us and rub us the wrong way. We can’t. Major and minor tragedies, most of the time, we can’t solve. But we can show a little love. A final anecdote: 1958, a relative of mine was jailed. “What a strange family, that priest!” And I had to leave the seminary because there was no one else to visit him, and I went to The Tombs. That’s the name of the men’s house of detention in Lower Manhattan, aptly called “The Tombs.” It was at night. It was cold. It was March, and the police frisked me!frisked me!! I said, “What are you doing?” “Well, we are frisking you to make sure you don’t try to pass anything to the felons.” And then one of the policemen said, “What are you.... an undertaker?” because I was dressed in black, like a good little seminarian. Finally, I get to go see the prisoner. The wall was as long as this church here. It was all glass, and I sat on the other side of the glass on a chair and picked up the phone. I remember when the guy appeared, I remember getting quite annoyed at God because the phone had static. I remember thinking, “Oh! Anything else?!” I wanted to hear every word. I didn’t know this guy was on dope. He was addicted. He didn’t sell it, but he passed out and they threw him in the slammer, and he told me that he had been arrested the night before (Saturday night) and he was thrown into the common room of the jail. To this day, he remembers the noise, the

cacophony of the noise in jail in the common room, music and shouting, and cussing. Very quietly, he thought unobtrusively, he went around the room trying to find a cigarette. (We used to call them “dintures” in those days, a snubbed-out cigarette in which there might just be one last blissful inhalation remaining.)No dintures. The ones that were snubbed-out were really irredeemable. He didn't think anyone noticed. Next morning, they wake him up for breakfast. He goes back to his cot after breakfast, Sunday morning, and there on the cot in the cell were twelve cigarettes, all different brands, mentholated, non-mentholated. So they didn't all come from the same guy. Twelve guys must have spotted him, dinture-digging, and dropped cigarettes on his cot. And I remember so well the twelve, and his saying, I can hear it now, he had had twelve years of Catholic education, twelve years. But he said that morning when he found the cigarettes, he said, “I got it!” Through the static, I can hear it now, “I got it!” ‘What did you get?’”I got it. I got the gospel.” His word, not mine. “I got the gospel. I got what Christ meant.” Now, the Pharisee might say, “Well, first of all, you shouldn't have been taking heroin. Secondly, you are in a jail and you are probably there because you deserve to be there. And, thirdly, you shouldn't smoke. But, somehow in that sordid, sad setting he got it! A little thing, a little love, twelve cigarettes.

“What did Jesus say?” Jesus, Damien, said, “If you give a cup of cold water to somebody because you love me in my name, you have saved your soul. You have won salvation because you are doing it for me. Not rigidly. Even the Pharisee there, “What kind of cup? Paper cup? Dresden china? How much water?Just do it. Keep it simple, not rigid, not based on emotion, accepting the fact that you and I are very confused and we live on a confused planet. We accept that and do our best by giving a cup of water. “What did Jesus say?” I told you, Damien.Put your hand down.