

Children

Object: A mirror.

Lesson: Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Boys and girls, do you have a hard time sometimes being good to other people? Have you noticed that the people we have to live the closest to are sometimes the hardest ones to love? If we have a friend who comes over to visit for the afternoon or to stay overnight, it's pretty easy to love them. But if it's your brother or sister, it can be pretty hard. That's because your friend will go home after a visit, but your brother or sister is always there and you're sort of "stuck" with them.

We know that God wants us to be good to everyone we meet. We also know that sometimes that's pretty hard to do. And we also know that, without even thinking about your brothers or sisters, there are people you have to be around sometimes who are just plain unpleasant. They may have bad habits, or be mean to you, or make fun of you, or just make it hard for us to love them.

What we need is some way to figure out how to love these people, especially the ones who are hard to love. I have something here that can help. (Hold up the mirror.) What do you see? That's right. That's you. You can use a mirror to help you remember how to love other people. Here's how it works. You look into the mirror and you see yourself. Then you ask the question, "How do I want to treat this person? How do I want other people to treat this person?" That's not a hard question to answer, is it? No, it's not, because we all know how we want to be treated. We want people to be good to us. We want people to show us love and respect. We want people to say good things to us, and to help us when we need it. That's what you remember when you look into the mirror.

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel story, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That means, after you know how you want to be treated, then treat other people like that. If you do, you will do what God wants you to do. And even your enemies will be happier than before. And so will you.

I

Mildred was a fine lady. She was 64 years old when the doctors discovered that she had terminal cancer. She was in and out of the hospital several times receiving her treatments, and each time she seemed to be a little weaker than the time before.

Mildred was married to one of the roughest roughnecks in Oklahoma. He was a big, burly man, and one look at him told you that in his younger days, he was the kind of fellow who didn't step aside for any man. However, around Mildred, he had become quiet and almost gentle. Every time she was hospitalized, Bill practically camped out at the hospital. He would arrive early and stay late.

It was obvious that 42 years of marriage had created a bond, a closeness between the two. Mildred summed it up one day when she said, "Although we were not blessed with children, we were blessed with each other."

Mildred was the religious one in the family. She had grown up going to church and when she wasn't too weak or too nauseated from her treatments, she still made Bill take her to church. Bill had never been much of a church-goer, but he was willing to take Mildred when she felt up to attending. On one occasion, she said, "The only thing good to come out of my illness is that I'm finally getting Bill to church."

On my visits to see Mildred in the hospital, I began to talk with Bill about his faith. At first, I thought I was wasting my time. Bill's response to my inquiries was often anger. He couldn't understand why Mildred, who had lived such a good life, was having to suffer. But, little by little, his attitude began to change. One day he looked at me and said, "Chaplain, there seems to be a lot of rules to follow and a lot of beliefs to comprehend. Can you make it simple? Can you give me a thumbnail sketch that will explain religion in a nutshell?"

I thought for a moment. How can you explain the beliefs and the doctrines of our faith concisely? Other than just making a long series of statements, how can anyone possibly deal with the complex and essential doctrines of religion in brief? I could recite one of the creeds, like The Apostles' Creed, and say this is what we believe. As a matter of fact, the early creeds came into existence because people were trying to give a short statement of what was important in religion.

However, I thought the creeds might be a little too much for Bill to digest and understand. So, I said, "Bill, you have asked a very good question. It is a question that people have asked for centuries. In fact, it was a question that was put to Jesus. So, the best response I could give to you is tell you what Jesus said. He said:

... Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength ... and love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Bill must have understood it because a few weeks later, he walked down the aisle of Mildred's church, and confessed his faith and was baptized into the faith. I was proud to be there. We chaplains open doors for peoples of all faiths and help them on their journey wherever it is.

We live in a world that has become complicated in many ways. Times have changed and people have changed. But, the response that Jesus gave to the question, "What is the greatest commandment?" is still clear and uncomplicated. For Jesus, religion in a nutshell was loving God with an undivided heart and loving your neighbor as you loved yourself.

As we look at this idea of "religion in a nutshell," I want to examine some ideas and how they apply to our lives.

I. Religion in a nutshell affirms that there is a God. When Jesus was asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?" he quoted from a familiar Hebrew text (Deuteronomy 6:4-5):

Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one. You shall love the Lord thy God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and with all of your strength.

This is the Shema, the basic creed of the Jewish people. It is the first scripture that every Jewish child commits to memory. It is the first sentence with which a service of worship begins in a Jewish synagogue. It is the phrase which the devout Jew wore on a leather bracelet when he went to prayers. When Jesus quoted this phrase as the greatest commandment, the Jews were nodding their heads in agreement. They knew these words meant that we must give our total love to God.

When you are trying to form a clear and concise definition of religion, this is where you start - with loving God. I wouldn't know where else to begin. Belief in and love of God are the basic ingredients, the foundations in any definition of religion.

Several years ago, an architect was given an enormous and almost impossible task. He was to design and build the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, Japan. Because Japan is a country that frequently experiences tremors and earthquakes, the financial backers wanted a building that would be able to stand up when the quakes came.

No construction job like this had ever been accomplished. The architect was careful and deliberate in drawing his plans. When the core samples were taken where the hotel was to be built, he discovered that eight feet below the surface of the ground lay a sixty-foot bed of soft undisturbed mud. The more he thought about this mud, the more the idea seemed to grow that he could float the foundation of the hotel on this quiet bed of mud.

His theory that the mud would absorb the shocks of the earthquakes was revolutionary. It had never been tried before. After four years of hard work and a lot of jeers and ridicule from skeptical architects and engineers, the building was completed.

Shortly after the Imperial Hotel opened its doors in Tokyo, the worst earthquake Japan had experienced in 52 years rocked the country. Buildings and houses with strong foundations tumbled and fell into a pile of rubble. But the Imperial Hotel stood firm and strong because the foundation rolled with the shocks of the earthquake.

Religion in a nutshell begins with a foundation that will help absorb some of the shocks of life. The only permanent, enduring foundations in this world are those which are laid according to the plans of the God of eternity. Belief in and love of God are the basic ingredients of any religion.

Belief in and love of God form the foundation which enables you to absorb life's most dreadful shocks.

II. Religion in a nutshell affirms that we are to love our neighbor. After Jesus quoted the scripture as the greatest commandment, he said:

The second most important commandment is this: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these two.

This is also a quote from the Old Testament. It comes from Leviticus 19:18 and in its original context it had to do with other Jews. After all, it was permissible to hate Gentiles. But, Jesus took the old law and widened its meaning to include all people - Jew and Gentile alike.

This broader meaning was a revolutionary idea for Jesus to advocate. He was saying that our love for God must issue in love for our neighbor. And, he was saying that our neighbor is anyone who needs us. A neighbor is anyone who has a need to which you or I have the capacity to respond. We are called to act as a neighbor to every person ... to those who are hurt ... to those who are unlovely ... to those who are outcasts. We are to love people because they are God's children. After all, how can we love God unless we are willing to love and respond to his people? In other words, we must not allow ourselves to become so hardened that we cannot respond to someone who is in need.

I was a pastor in Spring Valley, NY. If you want to talk about blight and poverty and hunger, all you have to do is to take a trip up and down the streets.

On one occasion, I heard that a family just across the street from my church was hungry. Because of a bureaucratic foul-up, a mother with five small children had no food and no hope of getting any until the end of the month.

Although the family was not Catholic, I went to the grocery store and bought a supply of groceries. There were three full sacks, and I went to the apartment building where the family lived. After carrying the groceries up four flights of stairs and walking down a long hall, I came to the apartment. I rang the doorbell, and a little boy about seven years old answered the door. He looked at my clerical collar and the sacks of groceries, and then screamed at his mother: "Mama, Mama, come quick. Jesus brought us some food!"

In telling about that incident, I thought, "I will never forget that child's comment. At that moment, I realized that I was the Christ for a hungry child."

If we are to be the neighbors that God calls us to be, then we need to understand that you and I are expected to help those we have the capacity to help. The opportunities for service are almost endless in every neighborhood - even yours., even in the confines of a hospital There are a dozen ways or more for you to help people if you are willing to be the neighbor God calls you to be! Religion in a nutshell means that you really are expected to be "Jesus" to your neighbors when they are in need.

The last thing I want to say is: III. Religion in a nutshell, compels us to be his followers. We have been looking at the commandments. They are a powerhouse of strength and direction of our lives. But, they mean nothing unless we are willing to follow God with our lives.

To those who asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was, he said, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." We are not far from God's Kingdom, but we must be willing to follow him.

Count Nikolaus Von Zinzendorf had been a very religious fellow in his youth. But, somewhere along the way he had strayed from the faith. He began living in the fast lane, and his faith began to lose its meaning and influence in life.

One day, one of his friends asked him to attend an art show. Together, they walked the corridors of the art gallery until they came to a large painting at the end of the hall.

It was a painting of Jesus hanging on the Cross and the Count studied it very closely. He followed every brush stroke. He looked at the nail prints in the hands and feet. He traced the blood as it trickled down the Master's face from the crown of thorns. He stared at the spear-pierced side. He studied the crucified Christ for a long, long time. Finally, he noticed an inscription at the bottom of the painting. It simply said:

All this I did for thee.

What hast thou done for me?

This was a turning point in the life of the Count. He returned to the faith and became a follower of Christ. And this is what God compels us to do - to be his followers.

So, this is religion in a nutshell.

1. Religion affirms that we are to love God.
2. Religion affirms that we are expected to be a neighbor to anyone in need.
3. Religion compels us to be Jesus' followers.

This is short; this is concise; this is crystal clear. What will you do about it?

II

SDG" -- Soli Deo Gloria, "to God alone be the glory." On each manuscript he completed, Johann Sebastian Bach wrote these three letters. When we imprint those three letters on everything we do, we are living as God would have us live. Soli Deo Gloriatu -- God alone be the glory.

A teacher of the law asked our Lord, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" As soon as the teacher heard Jesus' answer he knew the Master answered correctly.

Ten times a variation of the verse Jesus quoted appears in the Old Testament. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." When something is important, we repeat it. So does God. Four more times this same command is repeated in the New Testament. Fourteen times God's Word says, "Love the Lord your God...." That is the first and great commandment.

The question for this morning is, Do we keep this commandment first in our lives? What if I asked you, "What is your number one priority in life? What is your personal mission statement? What are you living for?" Would you answer, "To love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind and strength?" "Soli Deo gloriato God alone be the glory?" How do we make such a commitment to God in our society today?

Commitment is certainly not the strong suit of our generation. Adlai Stevenson once told of a pastor who so moved one of his congregation that the man jumped to his feet and cried, "Oh Lord, use mein an advisory capacity." That's how most people would prefer to be used today in an advisory capacity. How do we buck the trend and live for God alone?

WHAT IS COMMITMENT? In it's simplest form it is doing what we say we will do even when we don't feel like it.

That is what marriage vows are all about. Traditional vows include the phrasing "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part." If there was only 'for better,' or 'for richer,' or 'in health' and only one person in all the world that we ever found attractive, we wouldn't need marriage vows. But we make the commitment for those days when things are 'for worse,' 'for poorer,' 'in sickness' and when we might find someone else appealing. The commitment says that the circumstances may change, but the marriage stands.

In a recent wage dispute in Diyarbakir, Turkey, 1,070 employees of Turkey's Highway Authority filed divorce suits. Their grounds? They claimed that \$70/month was insufficient pay to allow them to support their wives.

That's an interesting approach to marriage. Have money problems? Get a divorce! Why not? After all, a marriage license is only a piece of paper, isn't it? Not for the Christian. We are committed.

Commitments are made to rule our feelings. Commitments keep us on the right track when our feelings would cause us to veer. Commitment means if I say I will do a job, I do it. If I say I will show up, I show up. If I say I'll pay, I pay.

Commitment involves unselfishness and sacrifice. It involves making painful choices. A pastor took his sons, ages 12 and 9, on a canoe trip in northern Michigan. The younger boy learned too late that once you embark on a canoe trip down a swiftly flowing river, it's too late to turn back. As soon as you push off you are stuck. There is no way out. You have to go to the end, like it or not. About half way on their journey this young man decided he didn't want to go the rest of the way. At the start of the trip, however, he and his father and brother made a commitment. They didn't have to get in the canoe. But, once committed, there was no alternative to finishing. That's the way certain commitments are.

Our commitment to God is different from a canoe ride in one respect, however. We do have the freedom to turn back. There are other options every step along the way. Thus, we are constantly confronted with difficult choices.

That is why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:31, "I die daily." You will never meet a fully devoted follower of Christ who doesn't die daily to a host of things that would like to have a grip on his or her life: personal ambition, the approval of others, greed, etc. Our culture ferociously maintains, "You can have it all." That slogan is a lie. Commitment means dying to, walking away from, or giving up many things that might appeal to us. Commitment means consistently using our time, talent, and treasure for God. What is commitment? To live "soli Deo gloria," to God alone be the glory!

HERE IS A SECOND QUESTION WE NEED TO CONSIDER. HOW DO WE KEEP OUR COMMITMENT TO GOD? I saw a poll recently that disturbed me. According to this poll most people go to church because they want to feel good. Now, there is nothing wrong with feeling good. Is there anyone in this room who does not enjoy feeling good? Feeling good is nice. However, we might ask the question whether that is sufficient motivation for a Christian. Many contemporary church-goers want what Jim Packer calls a "hot tub religion." They go for the peace of mind, or to meet people, or because it's good business. Commitment to Jesus Christ is far down the list of their priorities. Some churches are catering to this comfort-oriented religion. They offer not only padded pews, but padded crosses as well.

How do we live for God alone? WE DO IT, FIRST OF ALL, BY SUBJECTING ALL OF OUR OTHER CONCERNS TO THAT ONE GRAND CONCERN. "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God," said Jesus. Some of us have a real problem at this point. The drive for material possessions has almost taken over our lives. There is even a popular song stating our obsession with accumulating wealth. "I wanna be rich," says the song, "have love, peace and happiness."

I can understand that. Some of us were poor as children. We are committed to not being poor again. Anyone who went through the Great Depression understands this psychology. You don't have to be around a person who grew up in the Depression very long to hear what real poverty is! One fellow said his family was so poor they used to go to Kentucky Fried Chicken and lick other people's fingers. Another said the garbage man would back up to his house and ask, "Pick up or delivery?" Another said, "My sister got married just to get the rice."

Some of you know about poverty. Poverty brings pain; therefore, you are committed to having money which brings pleasure.

That was Howard Hughes' obsession. There was only one thing he wanted in life more. He wanted more money, so he parlayed inherited wealth into a billion dollar pile of assets. He wanted more fame, so he went to Hollywood and became a film maker and star. He wanted more sensual pleasures, so he paid handsome sums to indulge his every hedonistic urge. He wanted more thrills, so he designed, built and piloted the fastest aircraft in the world. He wanted more power, so he secretly dealt political favors so skillfully that two

U. S. presidents became his pawns. All he ever wanted was more. And yet this man concluded his life emaciated; colorless; with a sunken chest; with fingernails which resembled grotesque, inches-long corkscrews; with rotting black teeth, and innumerable needle marks from his drug addiction. He walked around nearly naked most of the time with his beard and hair to his waist. He kept his own human waste in quart jars which he stashed around his 15 by 17 foot apartment. He lived in darkness, wore rubber gloves, sterilized everything in his junkfilled room. He spent most of his time watching old movies and drinking soup. He talked on the phone for 10 to 15 hours a day, he was so lonely. Howard Hughes died weighing 95 pounds believing the myth of more. He died a billionaire junkie.

Donald Trump admitted recently on 20/20 in an interview with Barbara Walters, "Nothing is what it's cracked up to be." Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money." That truth forces some difficult choices on those of us caught up in a material world. However, if we are to live soli Deo Gloria, we must subject every concern in life to this one great concern loving God.

KEEPING OUR COMMITMENT ALSO MEANS CONSCIOUSLY AND CONSISTENTLY FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOSE WHO HAVE GIVEN THEIR ALL FOR GOD. I don't even have to tell their stories. Abraham, Joshua, Miriam, Jonah, Elijah, Jeremiah and a host of others. They were not perfect people, but they were committed people.

Jesus, of course, went beyond all others in demonstrating the nature of commitment. He confronted the most painful death ever devised, crucifixion, and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as You will." His example and his Spirit permeated those who came after him. The apostles, though terrified by his crucifixion, were electrified by his resurrection and would not keep quiet. Though they paid for their powerful testimonies with their lives, they were also committed!

First century Christians knew what it is to be committed. Caesar demanded that his subjects bow to him and call him Lord. Conscientious Christians could never do that even though such a stand sometimes meant their death. Our generation wonders why they couldn't cross their fingers under their togas and mouth words of renunciation, but these men and women had made a commitment. They made Jesus Lord of their lives. They would not betray their Lord regardless of the cost. They died with this truth on their lips: "Soli Deo gloria!"

Through twenty centuries of time faithful children of God in every generation have lived and died with that same singleminded commitment.

Now, it is our turn to take center stage in the drama of life. How will we perform? Will we live for money, popularity and power by playing to the masses? Or will we perform for the ultimate spectator, God? I pray that God will give us the grace and power to perform for Him alone! People in this no-commitment society will not understand. Living for God is a kind of fanaticism the world can do without. Who, they wonder, would be foolish enough to voluntarily suffer loss, refrain from pleasure, or lower their comfort level in life for an idea that cannot be proved? That seems like squandering the precious few days we have on this earth. But as martyred missionary Jim Elliot once said, "He is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." To such a standard of life each of us also is called.

The composer Verdi stood in the shadows of the concert hall in Florence during the performance of his very first opera. Though he would later garner the acclaim of the music world, at this point in his career he was unknown. Throughout the performance Verdi waited in the darkness with his eye on one person in the audience: the master composer Rossini. Verdi did not care whether the crowd would cheer him or jeer him. All he wanted was the smile of approval from the master. So it is with us if we would follow in the footsteps of Jesus and the saints of every age. Only the Master's approval matters. *Soli deo gloria*. To God alone be the glory.

III Desiano

The Golden Rule. It's everywhere, in a variety of forms. "Treat others as you want them to treat you." "Wish upon others what you wish upon yourself." "Never do to another what you would not want done unto you." It seems like not only common sense but also common empathy. Emotional intelligence 101.

We hear Jesus give a version of the Golden Rule in the second part of the one great law today, echoing basic Jewish teaching: "Love others as you love yourself." Again, that seems pretty basic. But why is it so hard to do? And why does it seem even harder to do in today's world. We are far more comfortable yelling at each other, and cancelling each other out, than loving each other.

I think many times we mishear what Jesus is saying. Instead of "Love others as you love yourself," we hear something far more common: "Love others for the sake of yourself." In other words, the main focus is what we are going to get out of it. The nonstop ads we in the Washington, DC, area have to listen to, proposing and attacking one idea after another, mostly boil down to this: push what is for your best interest. If you have wealth, oppose taxes. If you don't have wealth, attack people with wealth. Do you really want the government sticking its nose in your medicine? Until, that is, we are uninsured and sick.

Jesus imposes a higher standard on us. The standard is not only the love that we expect for ourselves, which is hard enough in itself. The standard is God's love as a measure of our love. Because, let's face it, a lot of us seem not to love ourselves. "If I could only lose 15 more pounds then I'll look the way I want." "I never felt worthy of that." "I try the best I can in spite of all my inadequacies."

A lot of us don't love ourselves. And the reason we do not love ourselves is that we have not accepted God's love for us. Jesus embodies the ideal of the first commandment because he uniquely seems to love with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. For all our human attempts to live the great commandment, we could not do this until Jesus came.

But Jesus not only loves his Father with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He also shows us that God loves us with all of divine heart, spirit, mind, and strength. And that love is the basis of the dignity that every human being has. When we love another, we are loving what God loves and what God makes loveable. When we are distant from another, we are not loving as God loves nor what God loves. There is one commandment and it goes like this: selfless, generous love is the essence of all life, human and divine.

When Jesus expounds this, even one of his enemies seems to see his point. He recites what Jesus says back to him, appreciating the words. "You are not far from the Kingdom of God," Jesus says. In other words, the more we can bring the world to love with the love Jesus shows, the closer we will come to the Kingdom Jesus brings to us. And that can happen only if we, the followers of Jesus, ourselves

understand the kind of love we are called to experience and live and, in this way, give the world a better inkling of its calling.