

As we read the Gospel today it is pretty obvious that the powers to be have had enough of Jesus. After all he is challenging the status quo, he is threatening their power and their lively hood. This question is more complex then it sounds because by this time the Law had expanded from the Ten Commandments to include 618 laws and precepts.

Add in the adage I developed years ago based on my personal experience, that is if you want 3 opinions on a law or an action, ask 2 lawyers, then the trap opens wide. Any law that Jesus chose could be debated and in that debate they saw the opportunity to make him look bad before the people.

Jesus isn't about to step into that briar patch. He reaches past the application of the Commandments and Law. He chose's the underlying structure of love that the Law and prophecy are built upon.

Love of God must come first. God, whom St John describes as love is the source of all love. Without the influence of the Holy Spirit, we would not be capable of experiencing or giving love. Since our first obligation, what should be our first joy, is to love God, we must establish and maintain our relationship with God throughout our lives. This isn't that hard, and since we are here at Mass, the process has at least started within each one of us.

As our love for God grows, so does our capacity to love. In this, the first person we need to grow to love and respect is ourselves. Not in a narcissistic way, but in the way that encourages us to recognize our personal dignity as a child of God. As we strive to maintain that dignity, motivated by our love of God and self, we learn to control our thoughts words and actions. Sins of the flesh, sins of the mind, sins of the heart lose their attraction because we respect ourselves and we don't want to disappoint God.

Sometimes we reject the notion of loving ourselves, but if God did not want us to love ourselves, they why would he command us to "love our neighbor as ourselves"? (*Mt 22:39*)

Love, by it's very nature drives us to want to share the love we have in our relationship with God with others. The question follows, how do we do that? Once again, Holy Mother Church provides an answer, the Corporal and Spiritual works of mercy.

The Corporal Works of Mercy, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the prisoners, bury the dead, and give alms to the poor are relatively easy. They require time, money and a small emotional commitment, some things that may be hard to come by, but with planning and prudence well within the reach of everyone in our community.

It is the Spiritual Works of Mercy, also within everyone's reach, that really make us dig into our hearts. They require moral courage and a deep emotional commitment. They are; counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish the sinner, comfort the sorrowful, forgive injuries, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for the living and the dead. Lets take a moment and break these out a little more.

There is joy in counseling the doubtful, particularly when they respond and progress forward on their faith journey but it is easy to get caught up in a sense of failure when someone doesn't respond. We have to remember that everyone moves at their own pace on their spiritual journey and that pace usually isn't our pace. Plant the seed and let it grow.

Instructing the ignorant is even more difficult for us because it opens us up to ridicule for our faith. Too often we want to murmur platitudes, "at least they are worshiping" or "it is all the same God". But upon examination, is it worship, or is it entertainment? And with religions that aren't Christian, in other words, they don't believe in the Triune God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, 3 persons, one being, is it really the same God or is it something or worse, someone else that is being worshiped?

Admonishing the sinner is probably the most difficult task of all. First, it has to be done out of love and concern for their soul and the possibility of them spending their eternal life in hell. Second, the admonishment must be based on the teachings of the Magisterium of the Church, not on an opinion piece found on the internet. In other words, it must be orthodox. Finally we have to recognize that most people, at least initially will reject the admonishment and they may reject us because of the admonishment. After all, in our society today everyone's opinions and actions have equal value and there for all are equally correct according to secular thought, therefore according to secular thought they can reject you and what you are trying to say without penalty.

Comforting the sorrowful doesn't mean muttering a standard platitude and offering a handshake and a hug. It requires some level of emotional

commitment and willingness to stand with the sorrowful in their grief. It requires us, to some degree, to grieve with them.

Forgiving injuries, physical, emotional and spiritual is a constant challenge and a requirement for our own salvation. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” is one of the most difficult tasks we have on our spiritual journey; that is why we pray for help with this spiritual work of mercy every time we pray the “Our Father”.

We aren't very good at 'bearing wrongs patiently'. We want to seek justice, which too often looks like retribution. Instead, we should be offering up the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' to God in reparation of our sins and the souls in purgatory.

Finally we have praying for the living and the dead. Fr. Gaul constantly reminds us that our way out of purgatory is through the prayers of others and the person guaranteed to pray for us is the one who entered heaven based in part on the prayers we offered for that purpose.

Since this is Respect life month we need to address an excerpt from the Old Testament reading for today. (*Ex 22:20-26*) This small clip is from 4 chapters in Exodus that primarily address the Law as it pertains to our relationship with other people and with God. What makes the few lines about widows and orphans stand out is they are the only ones in these chapters that speak to Divine retribution for an offense. The offense of mistreating the most vulnerable people in their society.

In our day, the unborn, the elderly, the disenfranchised join the widow and the orphan of the Old Testament. We must have those painful discussions, many times with members our own families to bring them to the sacrament of reconciliation for these offenses against God and man. When we think about how difficult the discussion will be, and begin to lose courage; think instead about how it will feel to be missing the presence of that loved one if and when we get to heaven ourselves.