

CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time | For Sunday, October 31, 2021

Do We Really Want To Hear?

Written by Fr. Mark Suslenko

Deuteronomy 6:2-6

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 12:28b-34



Christians did a great disservice to themselves when they lost touch with [Israel's Shema prayer](#): "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!" Jesus was very familiar with this prayer and references it in his teaching on the commandments. These simple yet powerful words are at the center of a devout Jew's habit of prayer, recited both in the morning and the evening, on Yom Kippur, and traditionally as one's last words before death. It is a constant reminder that God alone is God, a lesson of which we must be reminded regularly. We can easily make many other things our "gods." When we follow a different compass we can suddenly find ourselves off center, lost and feeling disconnected. Only God can be our true north. There are no substitutes. If we take a good look at ourselves, there are many things that we make unnecessarily important. We can be more devoted to serving and securing them rather than the genuine God of our lives: our Maker, Sustainer, and Redeemer.

Jesus also makes a big point of intimately linking the love of neighbor with the love of God. Acts of kindness are important. Many people's lives get turned around as a result of them. We read such stories all the time: of courageous police officers doing incredible work for their community and charitable acts for those in need, a food-service employee reaching out to someone who is hurting, a classmate standing up for someone who is bullied, and the lonely, homeless, and friendless human being being comforted by someone who truly cares. But is doing a few of these "random acts of kindness" every once in a while enough to fulfill Jesus' commandment? As good and effective as these gestures are, they alone are not enough. It is not sufficient to check the "random act of kindness" box on our Christian "to-do list" and then move on to other things. Does being a good Christian mean simply obeying the laws and requirements of our faith? Or, is there more to it than that?

It's not about laws. Being a devout believer is about attending to our relationships. Jesus wants to make sure we have the first one straightened out so that we can properly attend to the others. This is where religion steps in. Good, healthy religion is not about simply articulating laws and demanding conformity. True religion is about relationships. A good, healthy religion inspires, cultivates, and nurtures our relationship with God so that it pervades and influences all our other relationships, including those with our neighbor. A religion that is exclusively about navel-gazing, obtaining personal merits, and securing a place in heaven is nothing close to what Jesus had in mind. What religion needs to help us with is learning how to live sacred lives. We will find ourselves fulfilling all the precepts of the law in both word and deed not because we *have* to but because we *want* to. Love, fully embraced, changes our motivation. Everything is connected.

Even if good fruit is born as a result as a result of our positive actions, it is ultimately useless if our relationships with God and our neighbor are misaligned. Looking to God as the one, true God and not falling for seemingly more satisfying substitutes, is the only way to purge ourselves from the self-interest, pride, and personal agendas that easily color our loving. Jesus reminds us that life is a sacred dance featuring ourselves, our neighbors, and God. It is a dance choreographed by the Master Composer himself. We cannot risk forgetting that God is God, as God is in all things, before all things, and the end of all things. We are drawn to the heart of our neighbors because of God's sacred presence alive in their souls. It draws us out of ourselves and to them. [St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross](#) said, "As for what concerns our relations with our fellow men, the anguish in our neighbor's soul must break all precept. All that we do is a means to an end, but love is an end in itself, because God is love."

God's divinity flows through the sacredness of life. This is why no human being can be allowed to experience unnecessary harm, want or neglect. Yet so many of our neighbors sob and cry because they have been cast aside or left behind. Without anyone to help, they suffer. Unless the world understands that it has a sacred heartbeat, it will never really learn how to love and live. So many things are falling apart around us. There is so much conflict. Personal agendas, differing ideologies and philosophies are at war. People seek what they want over what is best for all. All these things and the loss of a moral compass all point to the fact that we have left the Shema to pages of history and consider it an outdated tradition. We have either forgotten or never learned our lessons. Now it is time to follow the anguish and respond to it.

Jesus stands before us today and eloquently details the beautiful first and second commandments. When we respond to him will he be able to affirm that we did so with understanding? More importantly, could Jesus, as he did the scribe, confidently tell us that we are not far from the Kingdom of God? We need to hear, once again, who God is and who we are so that we can fittingly and properly live with one another. Sadly, however, many of us do not want to hear that we are not at the center of God's universe or even the one we create for ourselves. Opening ourselves to the voice of truth puts a corrective into our lives

that may be hard for some to swallow. It will require us to change up our opinions about things, redirect our loyalties, care less about the world's agenda, and make some difficult choices. It will not be the most popular road to travel but it's the only one that leads to life.

"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!" To whom or what are we truly devoted? Our humble and honest answers to that question may shock us, especially if we consider ourselves righteous, law-abiding believers.

Fr. Mark Suslenko

PRAYER

Lord, help me to authentically love You with my whole heart, mind, soul and strength. Help me to have such an honest love for You that it also overflows into my love for others. May Your precious gift of holiness permeate my life and enable me to love You and others in a total way. Jesus, I trust in You.