

**31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle B) Homily  
Saint William, Champion | October 31, 2021  
Deut 6:2-6 | Heb 7:23-28 | Mark 12:28b-34**

**Deacon Robert Mintus**

A number of years ago, the morning crew on a radio station ran a contest. They wanted to know what the caller's first words were when he or she woke up that morning. The contest didn't take much time at all to catch on. Some of the winning responses probably could have come from us:

"Do I smell coffee burning?"

"Oh no, I'm going to be late for work."

"Did I remember to put the dog out last night?" This one was followed by a string of foul language and an angry "NO!" from the caller's spouse.

One morning, they got a response the hosts didn't expect: "Shema, Israel ... Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." There was a moment of embarrassed silence. Then the radio announcer said, "Sorry, wrong number," and cut to a commercial.

Our caller's prayer is central to the Jewish faith. It is still the first prayer children are taught, and every devout Jew is obliged to recite it when he or she wakes up each morning and as the last words at night. Why? Because it sets the underlying tone for the day. In fact, the scroll which contained those words, rolled up, was often worn by a devout Jew.

We might scoff at this, but don't we do the same things? How many of us have one of those rubber bracelets – from the yellow "Live Strong" one to the pink one for breast cancer awareness? Or maybe we have, or had, one of the "WWJD" bracelets. Or maybe we wear a medal of our patron or favorite saint, or even a cross or a scapular. We want a way to remind ourselves of what is important so we can focus on it.

Unlike many of the trick questions which had been posed to trap Jesus, this one in our Gospel from the scribe was sincere. There were over 600 commandments, dealing with broad topics from circumcision to dietary laws to temple worship.

Jesus responded with two things that were key for every faithful servant of God, and across every time and place. He referenced the Shema from our

first reading, and paired it with a verse from Leviticus – the book of laws - to give a concise answer. Love God with all that you are, and Love your neighbor as yourselves. Everything else is derived from these two commandments.

If we truly love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, then we will follow the first through the third commandments naturally – not because we have to, but because we want to. And if we truly love our neighbor as we love ourselves, then we will follow the fourth through the tenth commandments in the same way – again, not because we are worried about punishment or duty, but because we are genuinely concerned about them and want what is best for them, just as we want what is best for ourselves.

I was on the Internet and found a cartoon with the caption: I know that Jesus told us to love our neighbor, but he never met MY neighbor. That's true. And Jesus never told us that we had to LIKE our neighbor – sometimes they drive us completely crazy. He just told us to love them anyway. Even when they don't respond to that love and don't love us back. Even when they hurt us. He asked us to love them with a love that not only gives expecting nothing in return, but one that also forgives. That's a far cry from what we hear in our contemporary American society, especially over the past ten years or so, in

which we've seen the emergence of the notion that we don't even have to treat people with respect... that it's OK to make fun of our neighbor, especially when they don't see eye to eye with us.

The scribe agreed with Jesus, to the point of saying that observing the Great Commandment was "worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." That was a radical comment, considering that the sale of these sacrifices was likely where his paycheck came from. Jesus recognized that this man was close to the kingdom of God.

A number of years ago, while I was moving in to a new office, I found a sheet of paper with a verse on it from a previous occupant. It was old and beat up, but for some reason I couldn't throw it away. I taped it on the front of the cabinet right in front of where I sat, and I left it there for the next occupant. As I sat down to write my homily, it kept coming to mind... So I looked for it on the Internet. I couldn't find it exactly, but it went something like this:

*Be careful what you think, for your thoughts become your words.*

*Be careful what you say, for your words become your actions.*

*Be careful what you do, for your actions become your character.*

*Examine your character, for it will shape your future.*

Today, Jesus gives us something to think about. What are the words that we choose to live by? Loving God, and loving our neighbor is a great choice. There are many things about our lives that we can't change readily, but the one thing we can change is our attitude. Maybe it would be appropriate to write those words down, or to use them as our screen saver. Maybe we could recite the Shema every morning and evening like our Jewish friends so they would be burned into our hearts. If we can only focus on them and live them, we will be able to offer God a sacrifice of a pure heart. We won't be far from the Kingdom of God.