

Homily for Thursday of the 9th Week of Ordinary Time

"Love is an inside Job"

2 Timothy 2:8–15

Psalm 25:4–5b, 8–10, 14

Mark 12:28–34

A six year old boy was assisting his mother with some spring gardening. The mother was absorbed in her work while the little boy explored the miracle of growing things exploding everywhere. All at once the boy picked up a daffodil bud, and sat down on the ground, and studied it. Then with his two little hands, he tried to force it open into a full blossom. The result, of course, was disappointment and a mess: limp petals and a dead flower.

Frustrated, he cried out, "Mommy, why is it that when I try to open the buds, it just falls to pieces and dies. How does God open it into a beautiful flower?"

Even before his mother could answer, a broad smile broke across the child's face, and he exclaimed, "Oh! I know! God always works from the inside." This is a parable of the Kingdom. God's works from the inside. His kingdom is alive and it is growing when we open our lives to him from the inside out.

This is what Jesus is helping us to see in today's Gospel reading. God works in our lives from the inside out. Jesus conversation is with a scribe, who was a biblical scholar. As they studied the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, the scribes discovered 613 commandments. Therefore it was common in scribal discussions to look for the one general statement or overriding principle that would summarize and ground them all. Jesus here gives the scribe that overriding principle.

The Lord responds by quoting Deut 6:4–5, the great Israelite confession of faith known as the Shema (Hebrew for "hear"): **Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone!** By the time of Jesus, this statement was understood to mean that YHWH is not only the one God of the Jews but the one and only God of the whole universe. Because he is the one and universal God we are to love him totally from the inside out.

Jesus uses four terms that, taken together, signify not distinct faculties or parts of the human being but different ways of referring to the whole person. The **heart** (*kardia*) is the inner depths of a person, the wellspring from which all our decisions and actions flow. The **soul** (*psychē*) is our whole self as a living being, which Jesus said we must be willing to give up for his sake:

For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it

He also says he will do the same and more so:

For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus adds another term, **mind**, to emphasize that even our thoughts and reasoning must be animated by love for God. The last phrase, **with all your strength**, emphasizes that love for God is not a sentiment that arises spontaneously, but a commitment that calls for every ounce of our energy. How can such love without measure be possible? Only by our first knowing and experiencing God's love for us

It is as we come to a deeper realization of God's love for us that the inside job of transformation happens so that like the daffodil we can open up to express our love for others.

The second part of Jesus' response quotes Lev 19:18: **You shall love your neighbor as yourself**. Jesus is the first one known to have explicitly combined these two commandments. But they are the foundations underlying the first three and last seven commandments of the Ten Commandments respectively (Exod 20:2–11, 12–17). His implication is that they are inseparable: our love for God is concretized and expressed in our love for fellow human beings. I like to envision the two great commandments by looking at the Cross. Our love for God is represented by the vertical beam and love for one another by the horizontal beam. St John says something very similar in his first letter:

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

To love others "as yourself" means to make their well-being as high a priority as your own. Such love is indeed an inside job that flows from our deepening love for God which in turn blossoms into our love for one another. Such love cannot be forced because it is like a delicate flower. But when we are open to the light of grace the Holy Spirit can work in ways that allow us to flower and live as God designed us, to love him and one another and so fulfill the commandments.