

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 152

The ancient legend goes that St. Augustine, while he was writing a book about the Trinity, went for a walk one day along the shore of the Mediterranean to clear his head. He came across a young child digging a hole in the sand and pouring water from the nearby sea into it. Augustine walked over to the child, bent down, and asked, “Little child, what are you doing?” The child responded, “Trying to empty the sea into this hole.” Augustine smiled at the notion, and gently said to the child, “The sea is too vast to fit into your hole.” The child laughed, smiled gently back at Augustine and said, “The mystery of God is too vast for your book.”

There are times in our lives when, if we’re honest, we are simply trying too hard. Augustine was trying too hard to fit the mystery of the Trinity into his book. The child was trying too hard to empty the sea into his little pit on the beach. We know those moments because we’ve all engaged in, or been engaged by, that level of futility in our lives. Whether it is the student who desperately needs to get perfect marks, but doesn’t sleep much as a result, the athlete who over-trains and injures herself in the process, or the nurse who cares all day for others, but falls ill from neglecting to take care of himself. Sometimes, we all try too hard. Perfectionism can all too often rear its ugly head, and we all too easily fall prey to it. At the end of the day, it is just that sometimes we simply try too hard, but that’s not what God wants for us.

The truth is, God really doesn’t ask all that much of us. Perhaps the Church put it best in the Council of Trent when it said that “We don’t do altogether nothing,” in the cause of our own salvation. That is, of course, a really nice way of saying, that we don’t do much. That’s a good thing, because God doesn’t ask that much of us. Today’s readings point us to the most ancient and important prayer of Israel, the Shema Yisreal. Traditionally said by our Jewish brothers and sisters in the morning and evening, the prayer, which Moses offers as a command in the first reading, only asks one thing: that we love God. It is from our love of God that everything else flows, because if we let that love of God

permeate us, our hearts and souls are filled, and it becomes our strength. It's a pretty low bar. We don't do altogether nothing, as Trent reminds us, so the little that we do is simply loving the God who loved us into existence first.

If the bar is so low, then why do we try too hard sometimes? Perhaps the most interesting part of today's Gospel is what it doesn't explicitly state about the context. Jesus lived in a time when people would bring burnt offerings and incense before the Lord in the confines of the very temple that he was teaching in. The relationship between God and his people wasn't necessarily one of friendship or love, rather, it had become a transactional one. It was thought that an offering of goats or rams or turtle doves could, depending on the situation, remit sins, ritually purify a person, or appease or cajole God into being somehow on our side. As we see elsewhere in the Gospel account, this system was so corrupt that Jesus actually ends up overturning the tables where the transaction happened for such a sacrifice in the temple. This system was no longer about love, it was about profit. This kept happening when, all the while, God consistently had said through the prophets in the Old Testament, that such sacrifices were "loathsome" to him. So why did they do it? Transactional relationships seem to have a certain security about them, and that's what makes them attractive. For all the extra effort that they take, we like the security involved in knowing that we can purchase things, rather than waiting for them to arrive as gifts. We like to think that by our own effort we can somehow manipulate God. There's control in that way of thinking, but God calls us to a real relationship of love and friendship—one that we can't control. Sacrifices in the temple may have been well intentioned, but they were simply trying too hard and missing the point.

It's little wonder, then, that the scribe in today's Gospel applauds Jesus for saying that loving your neighbor as yourself is worth more than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. They both knew that things had gotten out of hand in the temple. They both saw the abuses, and the ways that even the seemingly most devoutly religious people would make an offering, and then go about living their lives as if what happened in the temple stayed in the temple, as if their dismissal of the immigrant and neglect of the poor wasn't in direct contrast to their devotion. Jesus reminds us that if we allow ourselves to really be in relationship, in a quite absolute, unreserved way, with the God who loves

us, the result is that we come to know that we are loved. We become more able to love ourselves, and we can love those around us, too. In the love of Christ and the love of others, the sacrifices of the temple become moot. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, in offering himself for us in love, in coming to earth and becoming one of us, becoming our friend and our brother, Jesus becomes our way to the Father in a way that those sacrifices never could be. We don't have to try too hard anymore, we just need to let our love of Christ fill us and guide us.

We've all dug our little pits on the beach trying to empty the sea. We've all tried to embark on impossibly grand projects. We've all been Augustine writing our books about the Trinity. We've all offered our own sacrifices in one way or another hoping to get the better end of some cosmic business transaction. We've all fallen short, because we've all tried too hard. Today, if we follow the greatest commandment that Jesus offers us, we remember that we are offered an easy yoke and a light burden, because in the end, all we have to do is love God and let that love transform the rest.

Amen.

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