

## **Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time: October 29, 2017**

By: Bishop Mark J. Seitz

### **“THE MEANING OF LOVE”**

"Love" – it's a word much bandied about in our world, but I think we would all agree, it is little understood. I don't propose to come to you with nice, neat, pre-packaged answers. Love ultimately is a mystery as big as life. But I would like to reflect with you on its meaning for a few moments and see if we might point ourselves toward the reality. I would like to reflect with you upon what love is and what it is not. And I would like to suggest a way that each of us can learn to be great lovers.

Let's begin with our *via negativa*. Recently on an evening news program a 28-year-old death row inmate was interviewed. He had received his sentence for the brutal molestation and slaying of a number of young boys. The interviewer asked him a question which often enters our minds when we ponder how someone could commit such a horrible crime: "Did you ever think about what your victim was experiencing?" His answer was, "No, whenever a thought like that entered my mind, I dismissed it and went back to thinking about what I was getting out of it."

Leave this example aside for a minute if you can and let's attempt our *via positiva*. This one you have to supply for yourselves. Have you ever fallen in love?... I mean head over heels crazy for someone? I guess that's kind of a personal question. ... you don't have to raise your hand. I imagine most of us have experienced a love something like that.

Interesting, isn't it. When we are asked a question like that most of us are thinking of relationships with people of the opposite sex in particular. Not that there is anything in the least wrong with this kind of love. On the contrary, it is when we first fall in love that I think we begin to discover what love really means. Love ceases to be just a word and becomes one of the most compelling, warm, wonderful experiences in our lives. When in love, the world itself looks different. It becomes a place of beauty and hope. We have a reason for being.

It is perhaps this experience of love that allows us to begin to better understand the

meaning of love as it applies to other relationships: The love parents have for a child, the love of friendship, the love of neighbor, the love of God!

How else could we begin to understand the kind of love Jesus speaks of when he gives the lawyer what he calls the first commandment? We are to love God with all that we are; with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind. Surely Jesus means this as more than mere high-sounding words that could be rattled off by rote.

What does it mean to love God with all our heart, soul and mind? Well, I think it must be the opposite of the attitude expressed by the man on death row. When thoughts of the other and the other's experience entered his mind, he quickly went back to a focus upon himself and his depraved wants and desires.

The love of God has much in common with our experience of romantic love. He or she is always on our mind, either very consciously or very close to the surface. No one is as beautiful or handsome as they are. We think of all they do for us, how much they care. Our one desire is to be with them. Nothing could be too difficult to bear as long as they are near.

If this is true of the love of two people, how much more should it be true of the love of God? He is the greatest Lover ... the one who loved us into being ... who cares for us at every moment. God is beauty in itself. With God there is nothing to fear in life, without God we are nothing.

Doesn't God deserve to be loved as completely, as really, as passionately as any human person? This is what the first commandment is all about.

And the second commandment, the Lord tells us, is like the first -- love your neighbor as yourself. Even though in practice we first learn the meaning of love by experience of the love of another human being, true love of God and people is inseparable. The love of people should lead us to love Him who made them. The love of God should lead us to love even more those whom God creates and loves.

Would you agree that if we could identify the greatest lover we could learn from that person a great deal about love? The greatest lover the world has ever known, of course, is Jesus Christ. As the Second Person of the Trinity he loved us into being. He loved us when we were nothing. He loved us when we had rejected His love by sin. As Paul tells us, "He loved us while we were yet sinners." (Rom. 5: 8)

One way in which God's love is greater than ours is that it is completely

disinterested. 'Disinterested' does not mean one is not interested, or doesn't care. It refers to an action taken without any self-interest. God doesn't love "*because ...* " God loves "*despite ...* " God loves because of who He is and who we are. God's love is not based upon anything we will do for Him. True love is the giving of oneself for the other without looking for anything in return.

If we want to learn to be a great lover like Jesus we will need to practice loving like Him. The scripture we have heard for today even suggests an excellent object for such a disinterested love, the migrant. "Thus says the LORD: "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 22: 20)

In the migrant or refugee we find those we would have a natural tendency to fear because they are different. They don't belong to our 'tribe', our group. If our heart can open in love to the migrant, if we can care for them although we do not know them, if we can feel their pain and isolation as though it were our own, if we can recognize in their faces the face of Christ, perhaps we will be on the way to becoming lovers after the heart of Christ.

There's no way around it. We Christians are called to be great lovers! Very often life, with all of its hurts and its many distractions, can make us lose sight of this truth. Sometimes it's not easy to love. The passionate love Christ had for his Father, his compassionate love for us, led him to his Passion and his Cross. Love calls us to so desire to share the life of the other that we long to be with them, to give of ourselves for them, not only in their good times, but in their pain as well. Such is Christ's example of love!

As we celebrate this Eucharist, the renewal of His love among us, let's fall in love with Jesus once more.