

Homily based on the readings from November 3, 2024 (Deuteronomy 6.2-6; Hebrews 7.23-28; Mark 12.28b-34)

When my family first moved to Connecticut about twenty years ago, we lived for several months in faculty housing at Connecticut College. Unfortunately, the house they assigned us was in a *horrendous* state of disrepair, so we wound up moving out as quickly as possible. There was one feature of that house, though, that I greatly appreciated. The previous occupant, who was a scholar of Judaism and a devout Jew, had installed a *mezuzah* on the doorpost – a decorative case enclosing a small piece of parchment, with an inscription written in Hebrew. The text on every such scroll includes a passage from today’s first reading, which comes from the Book of Deuteronomy:

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!

Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God,

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your

strength.

For many Jewish families, a *mezuzah* is an essential part of their home – just like a crucifix or an image of the Blessed Mother is for Catholics.

Although I have never put up a *mezuzah* myself, I was glad to have one in my house – if only for a few months.

The question addressed to Jesus in today's Gospel is a perfectly natural one, and the answer he gives is *undeniably* correct. A Jewish scribe simply asks him to identify “the first of all the commandments.” As you may be aware, Jewish law – as contained in the first five books of the Old Testament – consists of 613 separate rules and regulations, known as *mitzvot*. Some of these precepts are quite familiar: *honor your father and your mother – you shall not steal*. Others are a bit more exotic: *you shall not wear garments made of linen and wool mixed together – you shall not eat winged insects*. The scribe from today's Gospel is simply asking which of these 613 commandments is the most important.

Jesus responds, of course, with the very passage we heard in today's first reading – the text from the *mezuzah* – along with an important addition:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Even though the other 611 commandments are all vitally important in their own ways, nothing can be more essential than the love we have for God and the love we share with our fellow human beings. Even the Ten Commandments, as fundamental as they are to every aspect of Christian life, do not outweigh these two basic principles.

Over the years, there has been a great deal of controversy in this country about whether or not it is permissible to display the Ten Commandments in public schools. It is not my place to try to interpret the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause – particularly so close to a national election – but I *will* make one observation. If I had the opportunity to post *one* text representing Christianity in every classroom around the country, it would not actually be the Ten Commandments – it would be the *one* commandment that Jesus himself identified as being the most important:

[Y]ou shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.

In fact, the very next line in this passage – just one verse beyond the conclusion of our first reading – tells us to “teach [these words] diligently to [our] children.” Whether at school, in church, or at home, *this* is the key principle we need to pass down to successive generations.

In fact, as the Church, that is exactly what we do. Some of our more seasoned parishioners will remember the following lines from the Baltimore Catechism, which Catholic children used to be required to learn by heart:

*Why did God make you?* God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world, and to be happy with him forever in heaven.

Even though the wording here is slightly different from the Book of Deuteronomy, the underlying principle is the same. Our one true

mission as Christians – as human beings – is to know, love, and serve the Lord.

As flawed and feeble human beings, how is it even *possible* for us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? The answer, of course, is that the very *purpose* of our earthly existence – the entire reason we are here – is to make *progress* toward this goal. Our family, our friendships, our education, our professional life, our participation in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, our reception of the sacraments – all of these are God-given *opportunities* to grow in his knowledge, love, and service. Whether we remind ourselves of this fact by attaching a scroll to our doorpost, or by repeating a few familiar and beloved phrases, *that* is the message we must retain – every single hour of every single day – in the forefront of our heart.