

You have heard today's gospel theme many, many times. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." We read almost the same words in the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, this morning. This is the "*Shema Yisrael*," arguably Judaism's most famous and repeated saying. Mark messed up the wording, at least as we have received the text. Hebrew scholars say that a better translation of the second part of the *Shema* is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your resources." For some reason, the evangelist, Mark, added "all your mind" to it, and in going through the translations "all your resources" became "all your strength." The bottom line is that you are to love God with all that you have in you. The "*Shema*" is a declaration of faith in God. It is a creedal statement. A devout Jew will say it twice a day, at a minimum. My point is that this is the core, the bedrock of Jewish religion: there is one God and the righteous love him with all their being. Judaism passed this understanding of God and our obligation to God on to Christianity.

Mark tells us that Jesus placed another commandment along side the *Shema*, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In our Lord's mind, these two commandments said it all. Everything else in the Bible is just commentary on this.

You know that you hear this over and over from me for the simple reason that it is the essence of our religion. Where love is absent, true faith is absent. When love is absent, the soul is in peril. I think that many find this difficult because they do not understand the requirement. When the Bible talks about love in this way, it is talking about our duty and our behavior, not our feelings. Love, in this sense, has nothing to do with emotion. The New Testament's word for this kind of love is "*agape*," and it is action oriented and conveys righteousness towards God and justice and mercy towards neighbor. This is precisely what Jesus meant when he said that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves. If we want justice and mercy we should give justice and mercy. And we can hardly claim that we love God if we hold back justice and mercy from others. I mentioned Rabbi Hillel to you several Sundays back. He was a contemporary of Jesus. Hillel said, if there is something that you hate having done to you, don't do it to your neighbor. To Hillel, that was the essence of the Law. We are expected to treat people with justice and mercy, and we cannot discriminate as to who gets justice and mercy. Christianity insists that all are equal in the eyes of God. If we want to claim to be children of God, we must treat everyone with justice and mercy, *no matter how we might feel*. We are expected to get beyond our prejudices and do what we know to be the right thing. This is what the Church means by *agape* love; you do the right thing, the just thing, and the merciful thing for your neighbor, even when you don't feel like it. Anything short of that is sin.

And so the Church pounds this theme into us, week after week because until we get it down and absorb it we are not going to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. We all know that I preach this almost every Sunday. “Love the Lord your God with all you have and love your neighbor as Christ loves you.” It’s an every Sunday theme because it is the bottom line of Christianity. When *agape* love becomes ingrained, we thrive spiritually. When *agape* love is gone, we are spiritually dead. To live in Christ is to live like Christ and we know from the Scriptures precisely how Christ lived, how he related to God the Father and to those around him. We are called to do likewise. *Amen.*