

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jun 12th 2015

I remember clearly an experience in the full Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius directed by Fr. Larry Gillick, S.J. The retreat was a major part of my Tertianship, the last phase of a Jesuit's formation.

Larry asked me one day during our conference, "Do you know what it means to love God?" I had never been asked a question like it before and had never really considered it prior to that moment.

I rummaged around in my memory of past experiences of the life of grace and prayer and the answer I gave featured the moments of service and help that I had done for others, God being the source of those moments ("The first commandment: Love God; the second like it: love your neighbor as yourself") Larry finally took me out of my reveries when he answered his question, "to love God is to let God love you."

There it was: the focus is all about God's love for me and much less about my love for God or others. I struggled with that response lots over the years, but have come to see that it is as close as it gets to understanding the love of God and the invitation that is for me. What does that little word "of" mean in the phrase the love OF God? Like Fr. Gillick's original question most of us may think of it as OUR love for God, but the deeper response is that it is God's love FOR US.

This brings us to the feast of the Sacred Heart. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is a shorthand articulation of the Love that God has for us in the person of Jesus Christ. It is one of the most significant reflections in a Christian's life because it calls us to discover God as the source of all love. Theologians say it this way: God IS love; therefore, whatever God "does" is all about love. Thus love is the very center of the way we relate to God and God relates to us.

Another event that affected me deeply and helped me to realize the meaning of love happened one day on a golf course. My brother and good friend Richard approached me on one of the boxes and put his hand around my shoulders and gave a squeeze that is pretty much the extent of a manly hug. "That's the way that God loves us" he said meaning the love that we share with others is God's own love for the one who receives such love from another. In other words, God loves us in the very love that another person extends to us.

These two events led me to reflect on God's love. Both my brother and Fr. Larry are well versed in deep faith and each showed that faith in their questions and actions which were suffused by the love of God.

In honoring the Heart of Jesus we praise God, the source of love and Jesus' giving of himself for us in his life, death and resurrection. The Sacred Heart, more than simply a feast to celebrate in our liturgical year, is a reminder of the centerpiece of the theological virtue that is intertwined in all the events of our lives: love.

O Sacred Heart of Jesus

O Sacred Heart divine,

All praise and all thanksgiving

Be every moment thine.

Tom Shanahan, S.J. - Creighton University Theology Department and University Relations