Loving God and Our Neighbor

HOMILY TRANSCRIPT | Timestamps removed; lightly edited for readability

A good friend of mine called me last night before the Magic game and told me they had an extra ticket. He asked me if I would like to go, and of course the answer was yes. We went to the game, and as has happened many times, we walked out dejected and disappointed, grumbling.

But on the way back to the car, he said, "What do you have going tomorrow?" I said, "Well, I'm going to be pondering this homily I'm preaching a couple of times this weekend." And he said, "Well, what are you preaching on?" I told him it's about the most important laws: the law of loving God with all of your heart and then loving your neighbor as yourself.

Of course, I had been ultra-focused on the first law throughout the week as I pondered it. And in one of those wonderful Holy Spirit moments, my friend said to me, "Yeah, you know, that's a hard law to follow. Sometimes it's hard for people to love themselves." So he went with the second one. And that made me think. I thought that was a wonderful insight that made me look at that second law and its relation to the first law in a little bit of a different light. Because how can we truly love our brother and sister if we don't know how to truly love ourselves?

What does it mean to truly love ourselves? Well, certainly Jesus understood what it meant, and what he wanted for us was to love our God with all of our heart. Because if we do that, if we can pull that off, brothers and sisters, if we can truly love our God with all of our heart, all of our understanding, and everything we've got, well then, loving ourselves will fall into line. And if we love ourselves, loving God the way we should, then we'll be in a wonderful position to help our brothers and sisters as well.

And what a beautiful thing Jesus was asking of them: pour yourself out completely. Over these past several weeks, we have been looking at Jesus' call for us to love God and to do things with the right motivation. This is what he continuously kept running up against with the scribes and the Pharisees. They would oftentimes be doing the right things. It wasn't that the things they were doing were wrong; they were doing good things. But somehow it wasn't connected to their hearts. They weren't doing it for the right reasons or with the right motivation.

And this is what Jesus wanted for us. Not only did he want it because he deserves it from us, but he wanted it because he knows that's what will make us truly happy: when we are able to completely release ourselves and give ourselves to the Lord. This is where he kept butting heads with the scribes and Pharisees. It's like, "You do this, this, and this, but where's the love? Where's the love for your fellow person? Where's the love for your God?" So certainly

this was a wonderful thing he was calling us to.

We live in a world, as we know, where there is so much need for that love. People are looking for the love of God, whether they realize it or understand it or not. That's what we're all out there seeking: that proper relationship with God.

St. Paul actually said in yesterday's first reading to try to be worthy of the call that we have. What a beautiful thing to think about. We've been given this opportunity. How do we hold ourselves? How do we respond to it? How do we show that love for our brothers and sisters?

When you look at the relationship that God had with his people in the Old Testament, I remember a professor in formation telling us that when God introduced himself to Abraham, it was not unlike God coming out to a little child and saying, "Hello, I am God." And as we watch the Old Testament progress, we see how God tried to show his people how to act and how to treat other people.

Sometimes he showed them by consequence. We see that in our first reading tonight. He's like, "If you don't take good care of the widow and the orphan, I'll strike you down, and then your wives and kids will be widows and orphans." So we can see that the Israelites probably came by some of their understanding of these things honestly. But what God was trying to do over the course of time was to call them into a closer, loving relationship with him. He wanted to show them how to act. He wanted to show them what to do to make the world a better place and how to take better care of themselves. But he also wanted to gradually bring them to an understanding of doing things out of love for him and love for their fellow person.

And so this is why, when Jesus came on the scene and fully revealed himself, this is what he was looking for at this point. It's like, "Okay, you have seen everything now, and what I ask of you is to have love for yourself, love for your brothers and sisters, and love for me, in the appropriate context."

And so certainly that's something to ponder. There are different ways we can ponder this. How do we get to that point? Bishop Barron, in a homily I looked at as part of my research, compared the love Jesus asks us to have for God to a married couple. He said there are different phases of love for God. Just like with the Israelites, it was a process. For us, it can be a process.

At first, it might be, "Well, boy, I don't want to go to hell, so I better do what God tells me." And then it might graduate to, "Well, I really want the right result in my life, so I need to do what God tells me." But ultimately, we want it to graduate to, "I want to do what God is asking me to do because I love God for God. I don't care what I get out of it. It doesn't matter to me."

There have been saints who loved God so much throughout history that they offered to go to hell in place of somebody else if it could save someone else's soul. Think about that: loving

God so much that you're willing to be separated from God eternally so that somebody else doesn't have to.

And certainly that's not unlike what a healthy marriage is. We don't love the person we share our life with because of something we hope to get out of it. We love that person because we love them. It's all about them. And if we both have that, then we have that wonderful relationship.

This is the relationship that God wants to feel from us. He wants us to love him so much that there is a complete and total surrender and release of everything that we are about except to love him. And if we do that, we will love ourselves, and our lives will be a lot healthier. And if we love ourselves, we will go out into the world and love those around us who so desperately need it.

We are now coming up on a time of year when that need is highlighted and felt even more by those who have it and by those of us who see it around us. So we might just take that time to ponder, brothers and sisters, perhaps in front of the Blessed Sacrament, perhaps in prayer at home with the rosary, whatever the case might be: How am I loving myself? And how am I loving my brother and sister here at church and out in the world? What am I called to do? What is God calling me to do to be an instrument of his perfect and beautiful love in the world?

And as you know, with Thanksgiving just a few weeks around the corner and Christmas coming up on the horizon, certainly there are many, many opportunities where need will be felt by people around us in so many different ways. And there are so many different ways that we can help, so many different ways that we can help and get involved right here at St. Margaret Mary.

So let's make that, as we head into the holiday season, a part of our preparation, if you will: that time to sit and reflect and think about how we're loving ourselves, how we're loving our God, and how we will love the people around us. Amen.