

In childhood we begin to play-act, daydream, and imagine what our life's work will be... teaching, a medical field, art, carpentry, law, business, mechanics, ranching; about the time we are sure we know, we find ourselves settled into something completely different! And, as it turns out, it doesn't matter as much as we thought.

What matters most is the life-long vocation that God calls each of us to - **The Labor of Love**; the labor of love that we hear framed in the O.T. and Gospel readings this morning. The Leviticus reading ended: ***you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*** We are who we are because God is. And "I am the Lord" has commanded (better translated, 'instructed') our labor to be not a labor of love, as in something we enjoy or love doing, but rather, the labor of love is to work at love; loving is the labor itself.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus is again being questioned by Pharisees in order to entrap him in his words, to publicly shame him and drive away his followers. The Pharisaic Jews were viewed as the most devote and pious; Pharisees took especially seriously, tithing and ritual purity. They studied all the 613 laws in the Torah, (what makes up the first 5 books of our O. T.) Their name means 'separated - ones' because they took their religion so seriously, they could not lead any kind of normal social life. They often viewed Jesus' actions as defying the law, as when for example, Jesus performed healings on the sabbath. Pharisees were too caught up in the letter of the law, often missing the spirit of the law.

They ask Jesus what they hope to be an impossible question to answer: *Which commandment in the law is greatest?* Jesus replies, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* That is to say, in these two intertwined laws/instructions are summarized all of the laws and teaching of God. Jesus then followed up with a question for them, but they were unable to answer. Jesus had a knack for leaving intellectuals speechless. From then on no one dared to ask Jesus anymore questions to trap him, for he had again put them to shame, and this time, royally so!

Jesus' answer was not a thought out of no-where. He cited two things from the Hebrew Bible (our O.T.) He and the Pharisees knew the Shema, a creed or brief statement of belief that Jews recited two to three times a day, much as we recite the Lord's Prayer daily in our morning/noon/evening prayer. It was the first thing taught to a Jewish child; everyone knew it by heart. Shema means "hear": ***Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*** (Deut. 6:4-5) It's a simple statement, that there is only one God and how humans are to relate to God. Along with the Shema, Jesus also used Leviticus 19:18 in his answer, ***...you shall love your neighbor as yourself....*** The words of Jesus' reply would not have been new to the Pharisees...they should have known the answer!

So what is important for us to receive and understand from Jesus' answer, is that whatever our career choice, God has called us first and foremost to the labor of love as a life-long vocation. Stated by Jesus in the summary of the law and the prophets with only two sentences, the description of our labor is easily

carried with us at all times, to be used in all our discernment and decision making; it is to be the foundation for all our actions and deeds. If we keep these words ever before us, we will be like those described in today's great psalm of hope: *They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper.*

Jesus' summary of the law in the teaching to love God first and foremost and then, out of that love to love our neighbor as ourself, tells us what our true labor is, regardless of how we make our living in the world. The labor of love is the doing of God's will in all aspects of our life; it gives feet to our walking in the Way of Jesus, embodies the way of Love.

If you have ever sat and stared off into the distance or into the warm fire and wondered what you are on this earth for, what you were made for, what life is all about – you have the answer. God has told you through the mouth of Jesus. We were created, we are here, to carry out the labor of love – loving God first and above all else, and then loving our neighbor as ourself.

In St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, we are reminded that *we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel*; we are stewards of the gospel, that good-news of God's amazing labor of love. The section of the letter we heard this morning ended with St. Paul saying this: *So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves....* The stewardship of the Law summed up by Jesus in his reply to the Pharisees, our labor of love, requires us to share our very selves, as well as the words of the gospel. It requires that we be in relationship – with God first, and then with neighbor. Neighbor, as Jesus made clear repeatedly, is not just the person next door, or the person we like down the

street. Neighbor includes all diversity of persons, most especially those who for their appearance (whether skin tone/eye shape/hair texture/circumference) or gender or lack of wealth or educational achievement or country of origin, have been wrongly/sinfully pushed aside and ignored. Jesus calls us to love and to labor for and with the oppressed and marginalized in particular, not because being poor or being outcast or being disabled makes someone a better person, but because of God's mercy.

Jesus lived out a labor of love by becoming human and by living and dying as one of us, to open for us the way to a new and transformed life. So, let us respond to God's love and mercy with renewed dedication, personal and communal, to the labor of Love that does not discriminate. Hear again the words from the Leviticus reading: *You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.* Sisters and brothers, we are not on our own, we carry out our vocation - the labor of love - with God's help. With faith and fidelity carry on, loving the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and loving your neighbor, that is all others, as yourself. On this, hangs all the Law and the Prophets.