

“Two Tablets and the Debt of Love”

HOMILY – 23rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR “A”

Introduction

Have you ever noticed how Catholic art typically depicts the two tablets of the Decalogue, that is, the Ten Commandments, with three Commandments on one tablet and the other seven on the second tablet? Yes, sometimes you see five on each tablet, but more often it's three and seven. This is because the first three Commandments have to do with our relationship to God, and the others have to do with our relationship to our neighbor.

Love of God and Neighbor

In the passage we just heard proclaimed from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, he refers to Commandments that are on the second tablet: ““You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet.”” That is, he is speaking here about love of neighbor, our love for each other.

There are two senses to this Commandment of love of neighbor. Right before this passage, St. Paul speaks about our duties toward our governing authorities: paying our taxes, fulfilling our civic duties, all those things having to do with exercising responsible citizenship to which our faith compels us. This is love of neighbor in the sense of contributing to the common good. In the passage we heard proclaimed in our Mass today, he speaks about how citizens should treat each other, how they should act in

relation to their neighbor. First he speaks about the debt of civic duty, and then here about the debt of love: "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another." This is the one debt that must be paid every day, and yet, at the same time, is the one we will go on owing every day. But why?

This has to do with the first tablet: our debt to God due to our state of sin, which separated us from Him. God paid that debt for us through His Son's self-offering on the Cross, because we could never pay it ourselves. This is why St. Paul says: "The Commandments ... are summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" and, therefore, "love is the fulfillment of the law" – that is, our love for God expresses itself in fulfilling our duties toward Him, and it is fulfilled in showing love toward our neighbors. So, although we can never *repay* the debt we owe to God, we can express our gratitude by paying the debt of love that we owe to one another – indeed, we must, for otherwise our love of God is unfulfilled.

The Believer in the World

Of course, there will always be conflict; there has been from the beginning, as the Gospel reading for today's Mass makes clear. Notice what our Lord teaches here about how his disciples are to resolve their conflicts: peaceably, fairly, and with justice. At times that may require a harsher treatment even to the point of exclusion from sharing in the life of the community, but it is always for the purpose of bringing about the conversion of the offender and the offender's return to the full life of the community.

This is the basis upon which the Church has legislated resolving conflicts and correcting offenders ever since.

Sadly, we see less and less of this kind of conflict resolution and fraternal correction in society today. Our culture seems to be imbued rather with rancor, violence, character assassination, a refusal to listen to and understand the other and instead rushing to judgment to punish those who disagree. It cannot be this way among the community of believers. As those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, our community, our Church, must be a model, a guiding light to our society, of how peacefully to resolve differences: with compassion, mutual understanding, and concern for the common good.

In a sense, it is a sort of corporate fraternal correction by the Church community to society. But this is a very delicate path to trod, and we must be careful not to slide off course. We can gain an understanding of how to do this from the origin of the very word "correct" itself. It comes from the Latin word "corrigere," which in turn is a contraction of "cum alio regere," that is, "to rule with another." This means, then, that you must be able to rule yourself, before you can exercise fraternal correction to another, and if you cannot rule yourself, you need someone else to rule over you with you in order to get yourself there.

Self-Governance

This is critical, because without self-governance, one's motivations will be skewed, and perhaps even harmful, when attempting to correct another. That happens when one acts out of anger, vengeance, or even the desire to vindicate oneself rather than

vindicate truth, justice and mercy. So one must first master self-governance. And how is this achieved? The answer is found, once again, in the first tablet: by fulfilling our duties of love toward God.

That is why we are here now, even enduring the elements to fulfill those first three Commandments (yes, enduring the elements: today it's the heat, a couple of weeks ago it was lightning storms!). This may cause some feelings of righteous indignation, since we have restrictions placed upon us that are not placed upon others in similar situations – and that, even though we are here exercising the noblest and greatest action that any human being can do and for which God created us: worship of Him, the one, true God.

Nonetheless, we cannot give into acting out of anger or vengeance; following the dictates of our faith that compel us to exercise responsible citizenship, we must observe sound safety practices in our day-to-day life, while at the same time continuing to fight and advocate for justice for ourselves and for all worshipping people of faith. That is why I am so grateful to you for gathering here on our Cathedral Plaza for these Masses today: a powerful witness of faith, and of the primacy of the place God must have in our society, if we truly wish to have a society that is just and truly cares for the poor.

Conclusion

In other words, for the disciple of Jesus Christ, both resolve and restraint must be the marks of the disciple's mastery of self-governance. May God grant us this grace, so that we may be instruments of His peace, through which our society will give Him primacy of place and so attain true and lasting justice for all.