

## NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 22:34-46

*Love the way God wants it.*

Ladies, we don't mean to do it most of the time. Honestly, we have the best of intentions. We want to do something nice for you, and so we do what we think you will like, and that's where we drop the ball. And that's why some of us have bought you vacuums as birthday presents, or taken you on a romantic date to watch a football game at the local pub, or painted a room some repulsive color, or wooed you by flexing our muscles, or rented a shoot-'em-up and kill-'em-all-and-let-God-sort-'em out action movie for some quality time together. Once again, we had the best of intentions much of the time, and, believe it or not, we were trying to be loving, but, well, sometimes we just don't get you very well. We aren't necessarily from Mars and you from Venus. No, we both are from Saginaw. But living in the same house doesn't mean sometimes we're not worlds apart. But I do know something that might help us next time we want to show you some love. It's not necessarily a fancy idea, but I think it might work. We could ask you what you'd like for us to do. What do you think?

Guesswork makes for shabby signs of affection and endearment. No, the best route is to know the one you love, and the best way to know the one you love is to talk to them, and not only to talk, but to listen. This isn't only true in marriage, either. No, this is also true in our relationship with the Church's bride, our heavenly Bridegroom. We do well not to guess at what He would like us to do for Him, at what might please Him, at how best we can love Him, but rather to listen to Him. And the good news is serving God is a lot easier than we often make it out to be when we conjure up our own works to do for Him. It's as easy as Jesus' words in our Holy Gospel today: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."*

It didn't take long after Saul became the king of Israel for him to illustrate the mistake Christians often make in this regard. He had been commanded by God to go and defeat one of Israel's enemies and oppressors, the Amelekites, and to destroy all the plunder, keeping nothing for himself, for it was God who had granted the victory and the Israelites were not raiders, pirates, or marauders, but in a battle for the survival of their nation and, most importantly, their God-given faith. And Saul made a good start of it, and the Lord granted Israel victory, but it went downhill from there. Saul set aside some of the best of the plunder, sheep, oxen, and fattened calves, and planned to sacrifice them to the Lord. It sounds like a nice idea, doesn't it, like a way of giving the Lord thanks and credit for their victory, but it wasn't what the Lord had asked Saul to do. In fact, it was exactly the opposite. Saul, in trying to come up with a work the Lord might like, managed to ignore the very thing the Lord had told Him he wanted. Saul had, in essence, bought the Lord a vacuum for His birthday. And so the Lord had Samuel, the prophet, rebuke Saul. We read: *"And Samuel said, 'Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.'*"

*"Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you."* What terrifying words those must be to hear from a prophet of the Lord, but words that Jesus makes certain that those who fail to love Him by loving their neighbors will hear from Him on the Last

Day. St. Matthew tells us in his twenty-fifth chapter that the Lord will say to those who have rejected the Lord's Word by rejecting the works He has commanded, by failing to see Him in their neighbor:

*Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'*

In one of his sermons on this text, Luther comments:

But now because of the accursed devil's prompting, we allow opportunities to slip away and do not realize that without great trouble we can serve our Lord God, and yet don't do it. We think, if Christ were right this minute to come to our door, or if we knew where he were to be found, we would go to Him and give Him all we had. How often we wish that if we had been at Bethlehem when the child Jesus was born, we might have picked Him up, cradled Him in our arms, and cared for Him. But what is the good of such thoughts? The point here is that the second commandment is like the first, and it has to follow that our Lord God will cheerfully accept and regard what we do for our neighbor as being done to Him. (*Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, volume 7, page 53)

As Christians, we are called to love, to love both God and our neighbor, and to love God in our neighbor. And as Christians, we do not need to speculate what love looks like. No, it is easy for us to discover what love looks like. All we need to do is look again at a crucifix, to fix our eyes on Jesus, to call to mind the Passion History of Lent. St. Paul describes that love of Christ, that love we seek to return by loving Him in the person of our neighbor, in 1 Corinthians 13. Here's how he puts it: "*Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*"

At the end of our Holy Gospel, after telling us how to live as Christians, Jesus reminds us what it is to be a Christian, that is, to be one who knows the Christ, the Son of God, our Savior. Jesus was not merely a teacher like the Pharisees or an example like other holy men of the past, but He was the very Christ Himself, the Anointed One, sent by His Father to redeem us and then take up His place at the right hand of God, using His power for the eternal benefit of the Church. All Christian service must be rooted in this truth, for it is only through faith that we learn and are able to truly love God and our neighbor.

St. John echoes our Lord's words today and makes this point in his first epistle, the fourth chapter, when he writes:

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*

So, beloved, love one another, and in that way, love God as well. This isn't guess work. Jesus keeps it short and sweet. Love your God with your whole being and above all, and love your neighbor as yourself. What does that look like? It looks like a crucifix and an empty tomb. What a joy to be so loved by God, and what a privilege to be made new to love in such a way. Amen.