

In our first reading today, Moses is addressing the Israelites as they near the end of their wandering in the desert and are about to enter the Promised Land without him. Because Moses won't be accompanying his people, he seeks to assure them that their future will be secure and the Lord will remain by their side. Remain by their side, that is, if only the people will obey God's commandments. Moses goes on to assure them that the task before them really isn't that complex. They need not look to the sky or distant lands for guidance and profound wisdom. All they really need to do is listen to God's law as it has been revealed in their hearts. In our hearts, we typically know right from wrong. And we know that the path to righteousness is a road paved with love. Personally, I am intrigued by this direction to listen to one's heart as opposed to one's intellect.

In our gospel reading we encounter a scholar of the law who seemingly prefers to rely on his intellect. He quizzes Jesus and when he is told to love God and his neighbor with all his heart. The scholar searches for a loophole - asking Jesus to define what he means by neighbor. In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus clarifies that our neighbor is not a matter of proximity, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation or even friend versus foe – there can be no exceptions, no excuses, no complication – everyone is our neighbor and everyone is deserving of our mercy and our love. The good Samaritan cares for the injuries of an enemy and even provides for his enemies' care beyond the moment. Certainly these are heart-felt actions of love and compassion. Actions that the heart recognizes as appropriate and necessary. But is caring for our neighbor's physical needs all that Jesus wants us to take away from the parable? I don't think so.

Let's face it, as we head home today, encountering a beaten, half dead, naked man by the side of the road seems fairly unlikely. But that doesn't mean that we won't encounter people who are suffering. Our call to love applies equally to the emotional, intellectual and spiritual sufferings of our neighbors as well. For that matter, how will we treat people with whom we simply disagree?

The Samaritans were despised by the Jewish people because the Samaritans shunned Jewish teachings. The Samaritans inter-married with non-jews and they believed that God could be worshiped outside of the Jerusalem temple - particularly on the mountain tops. Despite their differing beliefs, today's parable reminds us that, as our neighbors, all are still worthy of our love.

St. Paul expanded this teaching even further. Perhaps our neighbor's injury is a bruised or failing faith. In writing to the Romans (15:1-7), St. Paul urged those who are strong in faith to put up with the failings of the weak. A social media blast or a screaming face to face exchange of criticism or even insults hardly seem to be heartfelt acts of love. St. Paul assures the Romans that God will grant the faithful endurance and encouragement so that we can be in harmony with each other and Paul encourages the faithful to welcome others as Christ has welcomed them.

Love does not mean always agreeing and it doesn't even mean an absence of arguing. If it did, my wife would have left me a long time ago. Seriously, it would be foolish to expect spouses to spend their married lives without some disagreement. I seriously doubt that there has ever been a child who agreed with every view of their parent(s), or any two siblings who have gone through life in complete harmony. Extend this argument to our Christian or more specifically Catholic family, and we should completely expect differences of opinion, perspective and even theology. We can wish that things wouldn't be this way but we know for certain that there will always be disagreements. So how are we supposed to deal with these differences; with heartfelt love, patience and humility.

As human beings, we are always changing and evolving. I assure you that many of the viewpoints that I held as a 20 year old are different from the viewpoints that I currently hold as a 60 year old. I recognize that some of my earlier views were at odds with Church teaching. But because I never felt attacked or ostracized for those views, I was able to remain in and grow in my faith. Conversely, had I been criticized or shunned or metaphorically left for dead by the side of the road, I may very well have sought the comfort of a new community and

never have grown to appreciate all that my family and faith had to offer. Because I felt loved, even within the midst of disagreement, I believe that the love that God placed in my heart was able to grow and eventually conquer my human intellect. My faith was given the opportunity to mature because my neighbors never stopped sharing God's love with me. And because I felt loved and welcomed, I believe it became easier for my heart to share God's love with others. To share God's love with all my neighbors and without exception.