

**“The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**

*Let me know if this sounds at all familiar. Your English teacher in high school gives an assignment to the class, instructing each student to write a paper --- maybe a short story, or something autobiographical, or whatever. Hands go up all over the place. And no matter whom the teacher calls on, the question is always the same: “**How long does it have to be?**” The teacher probably wants to answer, “However long you think it should be,” but instead gives in and answers something along the lines of, “Three to four pages,” or “At least 500 words,” or something to that effect.*

*Of course, you know **precisely** what happens. Many of the students (you and me included), when in the midst of writing the paper, start to **add all sorts of “extra” words** in order to achieve the required length. “The very short, brown-haired, skinny boy was walking his very friendly, happy, short-haired, sleepy-eyed, yellow Labrador retriever . . .” You get the picture. And when the paper comes back graded by the teacher, there are **all sorts of words circled in red** --- accompanied by comments indicating that many of the words you put in the paper were **unnecessary, redundant, or simply didn’t add very much to the sentence**. Many of these “extra” words could have been **removed** without changing the story in any meaningful way.*

**“The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**

What does all this have to do with the readings today? I do have a point --- I promise! In today’s Gospel reading from Matthew we hear Jesus --- when asked which commandment is the greatest --- answers by **articulating TWO commandments**: love of **God** and love of **neighbor**. Yet, Jesus, like my own writing from time to time (and certainly as a youth), seems to **add an unnecessary word**. Did you catch it? “The second is **LIKE** it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” You see, Jesus could very well have **eliminated the word “like”** (if you will allow me that sort of latitude in talking about the words in Scripture that come from the mouth of Jesus). That’s right --- he very well could have said, “**The second is it**: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The second **is** it . . . . There really is **no difference between the two** --- love of God **is** love of neighbor. **They aren’t separate things**. And there is **no** way to **do the one without doing the other**.

Many of us wish that weren't the case. Sometimes we **delude ourselves** into believing that love of God and love of neighbor are somehow **separate**, that we can somehow be "loving" God even when we **aren't treating our brothers and sisters very well**. And for those of us (you and me) who belong to particular faith traditions, this sometimes manifests itself in what I call "**hiding in religion**". When people fall into the trap of "hiding in religion" they essentially fool themselves into breaking apart these two commandments --- convincing themselves that loving God simply involves being **faithful to certain religious practices**, or giving their assent to particular **faith statements**, or maybe even by simply **being at Mass** or some kind of worship service Sunday after Sunday.

If we truly want to know whether or not we love God (with whole heart, soul, mind, etc. . .), we **shouldn't** be looking at what happens **within these walls on Sunday**. Nor should we waste time counting the "extra" things we do --- the adult education classes we attend, or the rosaries we say, or the number of spiritual books we've read. No. If we **really** want to know if we do indeed love God, we simply need to **look at our lives** --- our day-to-day ordinary lives, determining if we truly treat ourselves **as if we are the least** and if we treat others **as if they are the greatest**. That's the only measure that matters. However, to want the one (to love God), but not be willing to do the other (love neighbor), indicates that our faith is somewhat **diminished**, **impoverished**, and in extreme cases, **dead**.

It's like when you hear people say:

I really wish I knew how to play the piano (while thinking --- I don't want to have to practice day after day.).

I would really love to run a marathon someday (while thinking --- But who wants to get up at 5 am for the workouts?).

I wish I would have become a doctor (while thinking --- I'd never want to do all that schooling).

I'd sure like to be married someday (while thinking --- If I could only keep my independence and not have to deal with children).

There are many things "we want", but are **unwilling to do what is necessary** to achieve them. **Who doesn't want to love God?** Seriously --- who doesn't? I know **I sure do** . . . .

. . . . now if I can only find the strength to want to love **my neighbor just as much**.