

When we finished dinner on a Sunday night, I announced to my family gathered around the table that I had a school project due the next day on colonial Pennsylvania, our home state. As you might have guessed, I had yet to do any work on it. I was in third grade.

My sisters and brother quickly slinked away from the table. My dad just shook his head. My mom let me know what she thought of the bomb I had just dropped on them all. Then, in a flash, my mom picked up some arts and crafts supplies which were lying around the house and got to work. She began creating the cover for my presentation. She cut out several American eagles from a single piece of leftover wallpaper, of all things. She mounted those along with some stars and gold letters that read “Colonial Pennsylvania” on a piece of black construction paper which was then placed over a piece of white heavy paper stock. It was a masterful piece of artwork.

I got busy writing down several random facts about my home state regarding the time of its founding and several years beyond. I took those facts from our red Britannica Junior Encyclopedia. It was not the most organized, linear report I ever turned in. But I thought the cover might earn some extra points for me from my teacher.

A few days later I received back the report. I told my mom that it was graded and she asked, “How did *we* do?” Even as a third grader I thought that was funny.

The teacher wrote that the report was not very organized and she had the impression I had done it at the last minute. She also commented that while it was acceptable to give information from the encyclopedia, I should have had some additional information from one or two other books. (I knew that going into my panicked-project.) I received a C+ for the report and this P.S. after her written comments. “The cover was beautifully done!”

How many things in life do we undertake where we try to make things look good on the outside, but we just don’t give our full attention to what should be on the inside? Our approach to the faith can be the same. And that is exactly what Jesus is addressing in today’s gospel. While the first reading from Sirach tells us to keep the commandments, and Jesus affirms that teaching, he also instructs us to go deeper. He tells us that it isn’t enough to say, “I haven’t murdered; I haven’t committed adultery; I haven’t lied, born false witness, or taken any false oaths.”

Don’t get me wrong. It is essential that we keep those commandments and avoid those sins. Those things are the beginning, the starting blocks, which help to launch our faith journey. But as we hear in today’s gospel, Jesus calls us to move from simply avoiding sin to living and loving from the heart. He says that we have a role in building up the Kingdom of God by how we love others as he loves us. He calls us to move from serving self to serving others. While the commandments are the guardrails for our spiritual journey, living and loving like Christ is the rocket fuel that powers us forward on that spiritual journey immersing us in his Kingdom in the here and now.

And so Jesus teaches that we don't just avoid murdering others. Rather, we reconcile with others when we are at odds with folks. We "settle" with others - that is, we share a give-and-take with them. We don't always seek to be right. We give others the benefit of the doubt. We work as much as we can on forgiving those who hurt us and ask for forgiveness from those we've hurt.

Likewise, he teaches that avoiding adultery isn't laudable in and of itself. It is common sense. Abiding by that command brings stability to a society. But Jesus wants more for us than a stable community. He wants us to thrive and we do so when we see him in others. We grow as the People of God when we treat others as we want to be treated and as he treats us. For that reason, Jesus adds to this command and instructs us to respect others and value them for who they are – not approach them for what we desire them to be or do for us. No one is our possession or an object that exists for our pleasure alone. We are to look upon others as we would look upon God since each person is created in the image and likeness of God.

Then Jesus adds that we should mean what we say when we take an oath. We are not to speak ill of others or harm their reputation by speaking in derogatory ways about them. With these commands, Jesus asks us what is in our heart. Are we sincere? Serious? Trustworthy? Do we focus on building others up or are we intent on tearing them down?

Again, the commandments help us to live a good and ordered life and to live that life in a good and ordered society. But Jesus is trying to move us beyond the minimum to a maximum of life

in him. That comes about when we give ourselves fully to the faith.

This Wednesday we begin the season of Lent. I'd strongly suggest as you reflect on how you will live out this upcoming season that you consider doing something other than giving up chocolate or your favorite show this Lent. I'd suggest that during these next few days we reflect on how we can better and more fully live out our faith life with a deep abiding love. Maybe we can get involved in some ministry. Maybe we can focus, really focus on the predicament of others (like migrants) listening to their stories rather than making immediate judgements about them. Maybe we can get involved in an outreach ministry like St. Vincent de Paul or our county justice ministry like FAST. Maybe that will lead to doing something life-long rather than something which lasts for only 40 days, leaving us to return to our same old selves when Easter comes around. Maybe we focus on changing a habit like gossiping about others or seek to be more aware of what we say before possibly destroying the reputations of others.

Lent is about change. Lent is about recovering and recommitting to living with a heart that loves like God. What will you ask the Lord to change in you? How will you seek to make that change last a lifetime?

On Tuesday of this past week, we celebrated the Memorial of St. Scholastica. St. Scholastica was the sister of St. Benedict, the founder of western monasticism. She and her brother lived in the late 400's and died in the mid 500's. Benedict and Scholastica lived in different monastic communities. A few times each year

they met for a meal and during that meal had conversations about their faith. At the end of their visits, they would return to their respective monasteries as was the rule. During one visit, Scholastica had the sense that she might be dying. She knew this was probably the last time she would see her brother on earth. At the end of their visit, she begged her brother to stay with her. He refused. And so she began to pray. With her prayer, a violent storm arose. Neither had ever seen such lightning, heard such thunder, or witnessed a deluge of rain like what fell that evening. St. Gregory the Great wrote about Benedict and Scholastica's conversation at that moment. "Benedict scolded his sister and said, 'May God forgive you, sister. What have you done?' Scholastica responded, 'Well, I asked you and you would not listen; so I asked God and he did listen!'" As you might have guessed, Benedict stayed with his sister that evening. And they talked and prayed into the early hours of the morning. St. Scholastica died just a few days after that meeting.

St. Gregory ends his commentary with this observation, "It is not surprising that she was more effective than he, since as St. John (the Evangelist) says, 'God is love,' it was absolutely right that she could do more, as she loved more!"

A vibrant faith life is more than doing the minimum and simply avoiding the sins listed in the 10 commandments. It is all about love. It is all about loving like Christ. And when we love like Christ, we experience the fulness of his life and love in return. The season of Lent which is quickly approaching is all about discovering and recovering how we can better love like Christ. As St. Gregory taught, we can do more the more we love.

Let's get busy living and loving like Christ!

Amen? Amen!