

His Creative Answer

This Week's Readings at Mass

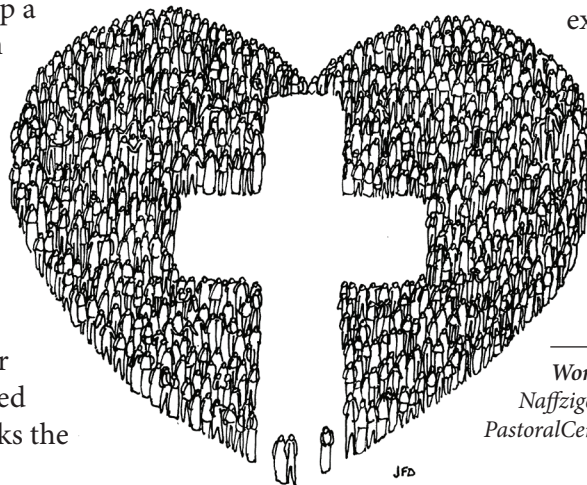
- ▶ Exodus 22:20-26 • Social laws
- ▶ 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10 • A model for believers
- ▶ Matthew 22:34-40 • The greatest commandment

Once again, the first reading gives us insight into the foundations of Jesus' beliefs. As a practicing Jew, Jesus grew up hearing these laws read aloud in his synagogue and home. His religion taught that it is wrong to oppress immigrants, widows, and orphans—those who were the most vulnerable in that ancient society. Jesus took all these teachings to heart and grew into an adult with a keen sense of God's compassion for the vulnerable. His instructions weren't new—they flowed from his ancient tradition. He simply reinterpreted them for his current listeners to understand them better.

The testy interactions between Jesus and the Jewish leaders and scholars continue in today's Gospel reading. This time, the lawyer who questions Jesus thinks he is putting Jesus in an impossible position. The Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) contain 613 different laws—248 positive ones, "you shall," and 365 negative ones, "you shall not."

How could Jesus name just one as the most important? His opponents stand ready to find fault with him for whichever ones he doesn't elevate. They are also aware that Jesus has regularly broken some of the 613 laws. For example, healing people on the Sabbath, which Jesus repeatedly did, is against the law which forbids working on the Sabbath. They might wonder if he will make up a new law, in which case they can accuse him of being unfaithful to their religious tradition.

As usual, Jesus gives a creative and surprising answer with which none of them can find fault. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart..." a verse pious Jews recited several times a day. Then he links the



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"You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Sheepish Question:
The Lord has given me the capability to fully love God and my neighbor—so what holds me back?

love of God to love of others by quoting Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He doesn't make up a new law, nor does he dismiss the other 611 mandates he hasn't quoted. He simply upholds those two as a way to observe and interpret the others. From then forward, Jesus' followers have a tool to analyze if they are faithful to all of the laws—in their observance of them, are they expressing love for God and others? If so, they are on the right path.

Questions of the Week

- 1 People in any religious tradition can go astray if they focus on the letter of the laws rather than the spirit behind them. When have you experienced this?
- 2 As you consider all the laws and "rules" of your church today, which are most or least helpful in supporting your efforts to love God and love others as yourself? How so?

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