

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OT - B

"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!"

This simple but powerful statement of faith known as the "Shema" is the embodiment of the Jewish religion.

Embodiment is a good word.

Orthodox Jews even to this day follow the custom described in the Old Testament of wearing these words as a pendant on their forehead and as a seal on their arm.

Perhaps you have seen a picture of Jewish men in their prayer shawls with a little box tied to their forehead and another to their arm.

These little boxes contain a scroll with the words of the Shema written upon it.

Another beautiful custom in Judaism is to have such a scroll contained in a holder called a "mezuzah" attached to the doorpost of their homes which they touch whenever they pass through the doorway.

The Shema is a profession of faith as well as a renewal of the covenant relationship between God and his chosen people.

This covenant relationship is lived out by loving God with all of one's heart, soul, and strength.

And so, in today's Gospel when Jesus is asked, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" he responds by proclaiming the Shema:

Loving God with all of our being is our first and highest duty.

However, Jesus goes a step further by defining the second greatest commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

So the next logical question might be: Do I love myself?

If we do not love ourselves, how can we love anyone else?

As persons of faith we believe that our dignity and our sense of self-worth rest upon God's unconditional love.

The love God has for each of us is the firm foundation for loving ourselves.

Because we know that we are loved by God as his dear children, we have the capacity to love others "as we love ourselves," that is, as one loved unconditionally by God.

For the past several weeks we have been reading from the Letter to the Hebrews about Jesus being our great High Priest who offered himself for us upon the altar of the cross.

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What greater proof could we have of God's love for us than the sacrifice of his only Son for our sake?

We commemorate that sacrifice every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

It was at the Last Supper that Jesus gave us his commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you."

Therefore, every time we celebrate the Eucharist we are renewing our faith in the love of God for us, the love we have for God, and our commitment to loving our neighbor as ourselves.