

## **The Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time October 31, 2021**

Bob was one of five children. His father worked long hours as a mechanic, leaving early in the morning before the children woke up and arriving home late at night.

His father never told his children that he loved them or was proud of them. Bob knew his father was a good man and that the only reason he worked so hard was to provide them with a good home. Then the father died. Bob often wished he could have spent more time with his dad.

Throughout the years that followed, Bob remained faithful to his faith. At one point, however, he learned something crucial about his spiritual life. He realized that his image of God was similar to his image of his father. Bob's father had always been too busy to spend time with him, and so Bob assumed that God was also too busy for him. Bob's father was distant and stern, so he thought God was also distant and stern. And Bob's father wasn't there when he needed him. So he believed that God would also not be there when Bob needed Him.

After his father's death it took hours of counseling and spiritual direction to help Bob to stop seeing God as a distant, stern, and uncaring Father. It began when Bob found the ability to forgive his father for not being the dad he needed him to be. When he felt down on himself, he reminded himself that God loved him no matter what. By spending time in prayer, he came to understand that God is not distant but present to him at every moment of every day. And by reflecting on the cross, he came to realize that God would never abandon him.

Bob is still working at seeing God as a loving Father. Sometimes he catches himself falling back into his old ways. But God finds ways of reminding him that he is loved unconditionally by his Heavenly Father and that He will never abandon Him.

Jesus reveals to us that God is our Father. In parables like the Prodigal Son, Jesus teaches us that He is a loving Father who is quick to welcome us home, forgive us, and provide for us. Still we can struggle to believe in God's love for us. It could be that, like Bob, we had absent and stern fathers, and we see God in that same light. It could be that we never got the affirmation and encouragement we needed as children, and we do not believe in our own goodness. So we cannot believe that God could ever love us.

But, nothing could be further from the truth. God created each one of us to be unique, unrepeatable individuals. None of us is an accident. He willed each of us into being. When He looks at you and me, He sees someone He loves and is proud to have

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created. At every moment, He is thinking of you and me individually. Because He has infinite power and intelligence, He can give His full and undivided attention to each person alive now and each person who has ever lived. His eternal and unconditional love makes it impossible that He would ever turn any of us away. There is no sin so great to make Him stop loving us or make Him unwilling to forgive us. Jesus' death on the cross shows us just how far our Heavenly Father is willing to go to restore our friendship with Him.

In today's gospel, Jesus teaches us that the first and greatest commandment is that we love God "with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength". Not only does God love us, but He wants us to love Him in return. He is not so much interested in what we can accomplish but in how much we love Him.

We know what it means to show love to people. But what does it mean to show love to God? What can we do to grow in our love for our Heavenly Father?

The first step toward making progress in the spiritual life is to ask God for help. A simple prayer such as, "Help me, Father, to love you more", is a great way of showing God our desire to love Him. Today's responsorial psalm is also a powerful prayer - "I love you, Lord, my strength." Repeating that prayer at different times during the day will keep us focused on God and His presence. Since God desires to be loved by us, He will always be pleased whenever we make such statements of devotion to Him.

Another way of showing God how much we love Him is by offering up our suffering to Him. When we are faced with difficulties and challenges, a simple prayer such as, "Father, I accept this suffering out of love for you," will train us to look to God for strength. The saints teach us that this is an excellent way of growing in our love for God. In fact, if we make it a habit of offering up our suffering to God, our love for Him will grow so much that we will look for sacrifices to make just so that we can have more to offer Him. This love will totally transform the way we look at suffering. Rather than something to avoid at all costs, it will be an opportunity for us to show God how much we love Him.

In today's gospel, Jesus links the love of God to the love of our neighbor. In so doing, He teaches us that we express our love for God by serving our brothers and sisters. Everyone is made in the image and likeness of God. If we love God, how can we fail to love those made in His image and likeness? By practicing the Corporal Works of Mercy - feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, forgiving those who have wronged us, praying for others - we please our Heavenly Father who wants us to be

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loving people.

If our image of God is that of a strict disciplinarian then, chances are we will become stern and judgmental people. But, if we see God as a Loving Father, chances are we will become loving people ourselves, eager to serve others and quick to forgive. The God who created us is indeed a Loving Father. Jesus shows that to us on the cross. Now He calls each of us to love Him in return and to love our neighbor as ourselves.