

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Deuteronomy 6:2-6

Psalm 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 12:28B-34

Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

When, in our Gospel, a scribe asks Jesus, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” our Lord responds by knitting together Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 into a single great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It appears at first glance that this great commandment is asking two things of us: to love God and to love our neighbor. But on second reading, we notice that the commandment contains something like a subsidiary clause or codicil that imposes a third obligation upon those who seek the kingdom of God. I’m referring, of course to, “as yourself.” At the very least, these two words tagged on to the end of the commandment seem to assume something that many of us find it difficult to take for granted. Do we, in fact, love ourselves? True, we can be selfish and self-centered. We can be self-indulgent, even self-obsessed. We can act as if the whole world revolves around us. But none of this constitutes the self-love that Jesus is talking about. In fact, these attitudes and behaviors might be symptoms of our *failure* to love ourselves. And the great commandment implies that, until we get this sorted out, we will be unable to love our neighbor, or even God, properly.

For years now, my colleague Dr. Karen Eifler and I have been presenting a series called, “Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film” in which we employ popular cinema

to treat elements of Catholic theology and spirituality. When we want to cast light on the spiritual implications of loving others “as yourself,” we turn to “Despicable Me,” an animated film from 2010. Gru, the main character in “Despicable Me,” is a self-professed criminal mastermind, but, at heart, he’s a nice guy. One way we can tell he’s a nice guy is that his meticulously planned crimes are more like elaborate pranks than evil deeds. A more compelling piece of evidence is that he knows each of his countless, nearly identical, little yellow minions by name. And they are utterly devoted to him in return. Why is this nice fellow trying to pass himself off as a criminal genius? It’s because of his unfortunate relationship with his mother. In a revealing montage flashing back to a series of incidents in Gru’s childhood, young Gru exclaims, “Look, Mom, I drew a picture of me landing on the moon.” She replies, with a disinterested, “Eh.” Then, “Look, Mom, I made a prototype of the rocket out of macaroni.” Again, she responds with a bored, “Eh.” Finally, “Look Mom, I made a real rocket based on the macaroni prototype.” Inevitably, she replies with the same, “Eh.” Convinced by his mother that he is utterly despicable, Gru decides, when he grows up, to excel at it. He will be the *most* despicable person he can possibly be. In pursuit of his nefarious aims, Gru adopts three little girls, who have themselves been treated as if they were despicable. He intends the girls to be pawns in one of his criminal schemes. In the event, they come to love him, and he becomes a loving father to them. The children’s love for him teaches Gru that he is not despicable after all. His self-image healed, he can now love others. He’s able to love his neighbor because he loves himself.

Many of us have interiorized the same message from the world that Gru receives from his mother. We aren’t smart enough. We aren’t attractive enough. We aren’t good enough. And ironically, the same people who are drumming that image into us are doing so as a consequence of their own

crippling sense of inadequacy. Everyone is hurting. So, we can live our lives in an echo chamber of self-loathing – a vicious circle revolving around despicable me.

The great commandment shatters that circle, and replaces it with a virtuous one, with the God, who is Love, at its center: We love God because we have had the experience, in Christ, of being loved by God. We love our neighbor, who is created by God in the image of God, because we see Christ in them. We love ourselves because of our conviction that we are beloved children of God. It is a virtuous circle encompassing what is truly *one* great commandment. We are each smart enough, attractive enough, good enough, for God. Together, we are enough, and we share that Good news with the world.