HOMILY for 30th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year A

This Sunday's Gospel & 1st Reading talk about loving God & neighbors. Reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this favorite cute story that I'd like to share with you.

It was snack time at Sunday school & the teacher was getting ready to hand out giant chocolate chip cookies. Two young brothers began to argue over who would get the first cookie. The teacher saw an opportunity for a moral lesson: "If Jesus were here, He would say, 'Let my brother have the first cookie. I can wait."

The older boy turned to his brother & said, "You be Jesus!"

In a society, we have all kinds of laws to keep it function fairly & peacefully. Likewise, in a religion, we need rules & regulations to keep its members close to their god & help them know how to live in the world. In Judaism, I was told that there were hundreds of religious laws to tell its members on how to be devout Jews, from figuring out what to do on a Sabbath day to learning what not to consume such as pork & blood of killed animals. One of the reasons why Judaism has had so many rules & regulations is because each Rabbi could make his own rules & demand the public to obey all of them. That is why we learn in this Sunday's Gospel that the Pharisees & Sadducees, the Jewish religious leaders, came to Jesus & tested Him with this tricky question, "Teacher, which commandment of the Law is the greatest?"

Those religious leaders did not ask Jesus that question to learn from His knowledge & wisdom. They did it to stump Him & discredit Him. If Jesus did not know all the laws of Judaism, He would not be able to answer that question. Even if Jesus did, He would have to compare & contrast all of them to come up with the correct answer. Evidently, that is what Jesus did & gave them the following answer, "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, & with all your mind…. This is the greatest & first Commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus basically summarized all the Jewish laws & teachings of the prophets into those two Commandments, which would later become the foundation of the Christian religion. He even pushed aside the Ten Commandments of Moses to come up with those two simple Commandments. He was able to convince the religious leaders with that answer & simplify religious laws for His Christian followers.

It is not by accident that Jesus put the Commandment of loving God before loving our neighbors. He did that because God is our Creator & sustainer; & we need to show honor & love to our best benefactor with everything we have got. Unfortunately, we have lived in a time that gratitude is no longer in our human DNA. We do not wake up every day & give thanks to God for a new day & the air we breathe. We continue to demand God to give us more & turn away from God when our prayers are not answered the way we want. In fact, the annual feast of Thanksgiving in our country has become just another just another holiday for people to come together to party & watch football. Worst yet, we have forgotten how to treat our neighbors even though we have claimed that America is a Christian country. We have mistreated our neighbors because of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, income, disabilities, & so on. Our current world is filled with hate & fights instead of love & compromises because our leaders have called us to hate & mistreat our neighbors; & sadly we have allowed them to do that without proper correction.

In case we would like to know how the Bible could enlighten us on the Commandment of loving our neighbors, this Sunday's First Reading has the following message for us, "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them & they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath will flare up, & I will kill you with the sword…. If you lend money to one of your poor

neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner toward him. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset…. If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate."

As you can see, the Lord has commanded the people of God not to molest or oppress an alien. Have we followed that commandment as a Christian nation lately? No, we haven't as you have seen how we have treated immigrants & foreigners in the last couple of years. The Lord has ordered the people of God not to wrong a widow or orphan. Have we listened to that order & treated widows & orphans with compassion? No, we haven't because we have continued to neglect proper care for nursing homes & half-way homes. Have we treated the poor & the homeless with dignity & respect? No, we haven't for you have seen how our government has cut food assistance (SNAP) to the poor & social programs such as Feeding America & USAID. In case you do not know, our parish has committed & collaborated with Feeding America program to help the poor in the Kentwood area & distribute food on the last Saturday of every month for years. Because of the funding cut of the federal government, Feeding America program has asked our parish to increase our monthly financial donation substantially even though we are not a wealthy parish. Of course, we have not ignored its request or abandoned the entire program. So, we have come up with a way to help us continue to support Feeding America program by organizing our first annual Walk called "Steps for Souls & Saints," which will happen on the last Saturday of this month October at 2pm in our Church Parking Lot. I encourage you to participate in it or find your own creative ways to sponsor it. The fund raised by this Walk will help our parish continue funding for its Feeding America program. I call on you to live out our Gospel values & participate or sponsor this annual life-changing event.

The two Commandments that Jesus expects us & all people of God to practice every day are not easy at all. But, they are the basic requirements for all Christians and the best way to lead us to Heaven. It is surely hard for us to love God when our lives have been turned upside down, or our prayers have not been answered the way we have wanted. It is also certainly tough for us to love our neighbors when they do not share our viewpoints & worst yet they might have hurt us somehow. Over a decade ago, I had an opportunity to preach about this Sunday's Gospel passage with my parish school students & ask them which Commandment is the toughest to live out daily. Most of the students told me that it is much tougher for them to love their neighbors than to love God. Because they would have to deal with their siblings, friends, & parents every day. Realizing that tough hurdle for all human beings, St. Paul has the following encouraging message for us in today's Second Reading, "…You became imitators of us & of the Lord, receiving the Word [of God] despite great trials, with the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit. Thus you have become a model for all the believers of Macedonia & Achaia." St. Paul apparently praised the Hebrews for their imitation of the Lord & the early Church despite their daily trials & challenges. They have also become a great role model for all the believers in the region. Hopefully we would follow the example of the Hebrews & do the same in our time.

My dear brothers & sisters, it is definitely not easy for us to master the two Commandments amidst our daily trials & challenges. But, with God's grace, we would surely be able to make those Commandments an important part of our lives. That way we will be a great role model for all the believers of our time & receive the biggest rewards in the Kingdom of God after this life.