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From the Selected Works of Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil.

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Love of God and Neighbor

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Love of God and Neighbor

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Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for October 26, 2014 for Cycle A:

Ex 22:20-26; Ps 18:2-4, 47-51; 1 Thes 1:5-10; Mt 22:34-40

LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR

Lawrence E. Frizzell

For many centuries the Bible was virtually the sole source of information that people had concerning daily life in the Ancient Middle East. Within the past two hundred years a great deal of light has been shed on the context within which God's Word came to the people of Israel. This enables scholars to recognize what was the common heritage of the region and what belonged in a special way to the chosen people.

Codes of law older than those found in the five books of Moses reveal sophisticated legal systems in Mesopotamia and elsewhere. Although the royal preface to such a document shows the king's gratitude to the gods for wisdom, the laws themselves deal only with the social order. Israel alone had the insight that God places human beings in a moral relationship with the divine order as well as with neighbor. The Creator maintains an intense interest in the human vocation; each creature made in the divine image is challenged to imitate God in his or her choices.

The selection this Sunday comes from Israel's ancient "Code of the Covenant" that follows God's revelation on Mount Sinai. Citizens of Israel were assured protection in the courts (Ex 18:13-26) but foreigners in their midst were not able to present their case to a judge. Would they be accorded justice? An example of the golden rule (Mt 7:12) is found in the commandment not to molest or oppress an alien. The motive clause, "for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt," expresses a plea for mercy that should echo through the Middle East (among other areas) today!

Widows and orphans were in need of protection because, in most instances, only an adult male could represent a case directly in the court. Women and children who were deprived of husband or father might be wronged by venal judges. If they cry out to God for justice, the divine Judge will exact retribution "measure for measure." In an unstable world outsiders might attack to loot and kill. Unwittingly they might execute justice and, in a way, be considered agents of God's wrath. "My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans" (Ex 22:23). This admonition may shock us, but it was intended to convey the passion of God's love for those shunted aside by self-seeking leaders of society. "If the poor person cries out to me, I will hear him or her, for I am compassionate" (Ex 22:26). The great way to imitate God is to exercise mercy or compassion (see Lk 6:36).

As people in the time of Jesus sought to understand and live the numerous commandments in the books of Moses, they looked for a key that would enable them to recognize the order among these laws. Jesus taught that it was easy to discover the principle that coordinated all the commandments into a unified system that would foster the profound meaning of life. The prayer recited evening and morning by pious Jews (centering on Dt 6:4-9) included the greatest

commandment. "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your strength" (6:5).

Giving absolute priority to the one God is the only fitting response of a creature who acknowledges that all comes from the Creator. However, this must not lead to a "flight from the world" that would involve neglect of neighbor. The will of God demands that all human creatures would work together (each according to a particular vocation and with unique talents) to build a world that moves toward the divine goal of history. This goal cannot be thwarted by human wickedness, but judgment is implied in the very gift of freedom and its concomitant responsibility. The commandments that reflect God's intense involvement in creation are numerous; Jesus selected "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lv 19:18) as the principle to guide our obedience to the divine will. To believe in one's own inherent dignity is the basis for a healthy self-esteem. To acknowledge that every human being, from conception to the moment of natural death, reflects the divine image challenges us to live the golden rule.