

31st Sunday of the Year [B] 2024

(Lial, OSF)

Trappist monk story... It all sounds so simple: Love God above all things, and love your neighbor as yourself... But is it so simple?

Many years ago there was a story in *USA Today*, which was so touching that I have not forgotten it, years later. This is the story the reporter told:

“We were in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, during a famine. It was so bad we walked into one village and everyone was dead.... We walked toward the next village and we saw this little boy. You could tell he had worms and was malnourished; his stomach was distended. When a child is extremely malnourished, the hair turns a reddish color, and the skin becomes crinkled as though he’s one hundred years old.

“Our photographer had a grapefruit, which he gave to the boy. The boy was so weak he didn’t have the strength to hold the grapefruit, so we cut it in half for him. The boy picked it up, looked at us as if to say thanks, and began to walk towards his village.

“We walked behind him so that he couldn’t see us. When he entered the village, there on the ground was a little boy I thought was dead. His eyes were completely glazed over. It turned out to be his younger brother. The older brother knelt down next to the younger brother, bit off a piece of the grapefruit and chewed it. Then he opened his younger brother’s mouth, put the grapefruit in, and worked his brother’s jaw up and down. We learned that the older brother had been doing that for his younger brother for two weeks.

“A couple of days later the older brother died of malnutrition, but the younger brother survived. I remember driving back that night thinking, I wonder if this is what Jesus meant when he said that there is no greater love than to lay down our life for somebody else.” “Love God, and be good to people.” “Love the Lord your God with all... and love your neighbor as yourself.”

In these days when we get upset because the local grocery is out of our favorite breakfast cereal or potato chips, and we grumble because hamburger costs a dollar more than it did last year, and we vote only for candidates who promise to give us “more” of whatever-- **people are dying** because they don't have the strength to pick up a grapefruit. Brothers die to save their brothers. In the next 24 hours, 25K people will die of starvation, 10,000 of them children. And we complain... I am *embarrassed* to have so much.

Jesus chastised his countrymen for paying more attention to burnt offerings and sacrifices than to each other. There is no greater sacrifice of praise we can offer to God for his many blessings to us, no greater song of thanks we can raise than to honor God in those who have been created in God's image—whether it's a boy starving in Somalia or the person next door who needs me in some way.

It all fits together: Devotion to God is not real unless it includes love for neighbor; commitment to others is incomplete without recognizing God as the source of all love. We are told in the first book of the Bible that we are created in the image and likeness of God. It is in the love and kindness we extend to others, that our humanity most resembles that perfect image. It is in acts of charity and selflessness that we participate in the very life of God. It's not just a nice thing to do if we have time, it's the way we will be judged. Our salvation depends on it!