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Today's Word
The Thirteith Sunday, Year A (25 October)

Parish Priest: Father Hiroshi Konishi

First Reading: Exodus 22:20－26
Second Reading: First Letter to the Thessalonians 1:5c－10
Gospel Reading: Gospel of Matthew 22:34－40

From these three readings
Let us keep in mind the phrase from the First Reading: "For I am merciful" (v. 26). God's mercy is shown by turning our attention to the weak, the poor, and the oppressed.

The phrase from the Second Reading, "receive the Word with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (v. 6), is particularly striking. To receive the Word is to accept the Gospel. To accept the Gospel is to accept Jesus Himself and to be drawn into a personal relationship with Him.

The brief words in the Gospel reading, "Love one another" (verses 37 and 39), strike at the very heart of the Christian faith. However, this is not a commandment in the sense of "you must." This is because the command to love—and the ability to live in love—is based on the premise that we are loved by a merciful God. Therefore, these words are an invitation to life.

A Word

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matthew 22:37－38) is Jesus' answer, but as already noted, it is a quotation from Deuteronomy. It is said that Jews were required to recite this passage—which begins with the word "Shema" (Hear)—twice daily, morning and evening, along with Deuteronomy 11:13－21 and Numbers 15:37－41, as a profession of faith.

What does it actually mean to love God with all one's being? No matter how often one recites these words morning and evening, that does not mean love is actually put into practice in the reality of daily life. Love is not something commanded like a law, nor is it something forced upon us by someone else. Love is what overflows from the very depths of a person's heart. Such spontaneous love and acts of love are born from the experience of having been

loved. It is as a response to having been loved that a person comes to love someone else. Therefore, only love can evoke love. The motivation to love God arises from recalling the experience of being loved by God and from the fact that we are kept alive within that love.

Since Jesus says, "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (verse 37), this love must be a love that gives itself completely, leaving nothing behind. We were loved by God not because we were worthy of receiving His love. We received God's gratuitous love—a love that embraces the meaningless and the sinner. Therefore, our response to that love must also be unconditional.

Jesus knew full well that He was loved by His Father in heaven. The words of His Father—"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11, Franciscan Translation)—must have always resonated in Jesus' heart. When Jesus sought to respond with all His heart to the Father's love, the path to the cross was a natural consequence for Him. We cannot help but see in the cross the embodiment of unconditional love—a response to God's selfless love.

While teaching about love for God in this way, Jesus adds:
"The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:39). The first commandment and the second cannot be separated. This is because love for God is concretely demonstrated through the practice of loving one's neighbor, and love for one's neighbor is founded on love for God. Love for God that does not give rise to love for one's neighbor is self-centered love. One might even call it religious egoism. While claiming to love God, such a person does not truly love God but merely satisfies their own religious interests and piety.

We do not choose who our neighbor is. Each of us is called to become a neighbor to that person. May we become people who love God and love others. To that end, may we deeply savor the fact that we have been loved unconditionally by God and by our neighbors.