

No matter how many interesting folk start out in the primaries, a political race for President of the United States ultimately comes down to two persons, squaring off through a marathon of campaign stops and speeches, sound-bites and TV ads, seeking to win the hearts and hopes, and the ultimately the votes, of the American people. It started as a wide-open race among many; but in the end the presidential race comes down to just two.

But this is the way we like it. We prefer things to be simplified, reduced to choices between clear options. Somehow, an ultimate finale between two finalists who have survived the winnowing process, to stand in the last test for the prize, seems like the best and clearest way to settle a complex race.

And it is not just in politics that we like this reduction to a final two. It is our standard method in sports. The March Madness basketball tournament begins with 64 teams, but quickly narrows down to an elite eight, then a final four, until just two teams are left to face each other in the championship game. A tennis tournament works in exactly the same way. And the World Series in baseball, too. We need a smaller number, like a final two, in order to capture our imagination, to focus our perspective, and to inspire passionate debate on sports talk radio.

In the days of Moses, according to our Old Testament reading for today, God gave the people of Israel a lot of commandments to help them know God's heart, and to follow in His ways. These commandments and laws were intended to serve as a blueprint, or a set of instructions, a moral GPS, guiding God's people through the world, and marking them as special people after His own heart. But in the five books of Moses, the Torah, there are 613 unique and distinct commandments given through Moses to the people. It didn't take long for the instruction booklet to started sounding a bit cumbersome.

So God, knowing our preference for summaries and reducing complex matters to simpler things, narrowed the entire bunch of laws, all 613 of them, to just ten great commandments. It is way easier to wrap our minds around 10 commandments, than to memorize 613 laws, don't you think?

Ten was good, very good actually, but God isn't one to stop at better, when he can get the best. God was not through reducing and summarizing His set of instructions with his Top Ten. In today's reading from Deuteronomy, Moses is instructed to give the people a single sweeping summary of the entire law. Here it is: "***The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Therefore you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your strength.***" As you might expect, that single sentence version was treasured by those who would be God's people. To this very day, this phrase, called the Shema, is repeated every day by faithful Jews.

Orthodox Jews go one better than just reciting it; they inscribe this phrase in small scrolls and place it on the doorposts of their homes, or in small pouches worn on their arms and in headbands. All of this to physically remind them, every time they pass through their front door, or stretch forth their hand, or look out into the world, that they are marked by their obedience to this one sentence summary of the entire Torah.

I'm going to make a bold assumption here that you actually remember the 10 Commandments. Since you do, you can see that the first three of the Ten Commandments are really elaborations on the theme of what it means to love God with one's whole heart, soul, and strength. But the remaining Commandments talk about what it means to live in loving relationship with our fellow humans—honoring parents, no killing, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, no coveting.

Clearly God did not think it was possible to love Him correctly, or completely, in isolation from the way we relate to our neighbor. And again, hundreds of the commandments in the Torah are given to elaborate on the details of how to live with our fellowman. And so by the time of the New Testament, and our Gospel reading for today, when a scholar of the Torah asked Jesus which was the “first” commandment, that is, which is the most important one, Jesus replied by quoting the Shema and that really didn’t surprise anyone, but then he added a quote from Leviticus, as if it was a continuation of the same “first” commandment. Jesus continued with “*And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” When you think about it, this phrase easily summarizes that second set Commandments, just as the Shema summarized the first three.

So the 613 rules are summarized in just Ten Commandments. And even those ten are summarized in just two great commandments, according to Jesus. Love God, love your neighbor – the final two, but unlike sports or politics, these two aren’t in competition. They are the irreducible minimum of God’s plan for our lives. They are inseparable since we cannot really love God and despise our fellowman. And we cannot adequately love our fellowman without the grounding anchor of love for God. Love for God in isolation from love for the neighbor is empty piety, a mere theoretical form of religion that makes no difference in this world – the world that God loves so passionately. But equally so, those who would serve and love the world apart from the foundation of love for God and openness to his spirit, are not able to sustain their humanitarian desire over the long haul. They can get discouraged when their fellowmen don’t seem very grateful or loveable.

A few years ago, a NY radio station ran a contest. Disc jockeys invited their listeners to tune in their clock radios. "Just for fun," they said, "when you wake up to the sound of FM-106, call and tell us the first words you spoke when you rolled out of bed. If you're the third caller, you'll win \$106." It didn't take long for the contest to grow in enthusiasm. The first morning, a buoyant disc jockey said, "Caller number three, what did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?" A groggy voice said, "Do I smell coffee burning?" Another day, a sleepy office worker said, "Oh no, I'm late for work." Somebody else said her first words were, "Honey, did I put out the dog last night?" A muffled curse was immediately heard in the background, and a man was heard to say, "No, you didn't." It was a funny contest and drew a considerable audience.

One morning, however, the third caller said something unusual. The station phone rang. "Good morning, this is FM-106. You're on the air. What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?"

A voice with a Bronx accent replied, "You want to know my first words in the morning?"

The bubbly DJ said, "Yes, sir! Tell us what you said."

The Bronx voice responded, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord alone. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." There was a moment of embarrassed silence that seemed to go on and on. Then the radio announcer said, "Sorry, wrong number," and cut to a commercial.

I'd like to think that if that DJ had been a person of faith he would have responded, "and you neighbor as yourself." Just between you and God, if you had been that DJ, what would you have said?