

As people of a society that is complex in all its laws and things that have to be done to apply for college, to be enrolled in employment benefits, to file taxes, etc., we can relate to the people of Jesus' time. Somehow, the 10 Commandments that Moses first presented on two tablets of stone, had become further nuanced and expanded over time, that by Jesus' time there were 613 laws that Jews were expected to live by. As life is for us, it could be overwhelming—like when you see that box at the bottom of five pages of small print that says “initial here” or “check this box” if you agree to the above terms. I'll confess that I don't have the stamina, nor honestly the interest, to read all the terms, yet I simply agree.

How do we make it simpler? Can we? These were questions Jewish people wrestled with in Jesus' time. An important Jewish figure who lived about a generation before Jesus, Hillel the Elder (40BC-10AD), was once approached by a man who asked Hillel, ‘give me the full teaching of God, but do it while standing on only one foot’. The point being, that if you have to do it while standing on one foot, you'll be concise and to the point. Hillel replied, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it” (Babylonian talmud, Shabbath 31a).

It's a similar question that Jesus is asked: “Which is the first of all the commandments?” Jesus' response, like Hillel's, is concise enough that you could likely say it while standing on one foot. And just as Moses originally presented two tablets that summarized the Law, Jesus gives two parts to his response. The first part, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength”, encapsulates the first three Commandments. The second part, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” encapsulates the remaining seven Commandments.

But Jesus' two-part answer infers that both are necessary. When we love our neighbor it becomes an expression of love for God, and conversely, our love for God is only expressed in truth when it gives way to loving our neighbor.

Perhaps there's no better example of one demonstrates the two-fold response of loving God and loving neighbor than the saint whose feast day we celebrate this weekend. We know him as Martin de Porres, born in Lima Peru in 1579. His father was a Spanish nobleman who would later hold a prominent position in public office. His mother had been a slave. Because Martin inherited his mother's dark skin, his father disowned him, and eventually abandoned the family.

His mother did physical labor to support her children. Martin overcame the sadness of his father's rejection and chose to find strength instead, in God the Father. When he was age twelve, his mother arranged for him to be an apprentice to a barber-surgeon. Martin learned how to cut hair, draw blood, care for wounds and prepare medications—skills that would prove useful throughout his life.

A few years later, borne from love of God and neighbor, he applied to the Dominicans to be a lay helper. Under Peruvian law, descendants of Africans and Native Americans were barred from becoming full members of religious orders. The only route open to Martin was to ask the Dominicans of Holy Rosary Priory in Lima to accept him as a “donado”, a volunteer who performed menial tasks in the monastery in return for the privilege of wearing the habit and living with the religious community.

Martin didn't believe himself worthy to be a professed religious. But after nine years of faithful service, members of the community encouraged him to formally join the Dominican community, having witnessed how he lovingly and patiently carried out the difficult work of caring for the sick.

He ministered without distinction, whether to Spanish nobles or African slaves. One day an aged beggar, covered with ulcers and almost naked, stretched out his hand, and Martin, seeing his great need, allowed him to convalesce in his own bed. "Compassion" he said, "is preferable to cleanliness." He had a special love for the outcasts, having known that experience first-hand.

Earlier in his years as a Dominican, not all the friars were welcoming, and in fact, some mocked his humble origins, but by the end of his life, he had won their affection and respect. He died on 3 November 1639. In the days that followed his death, many came from far and wide, having known of his love of God and love of neighbor, came to visit his body, to pay their respects and express their gratitude for his loving service.

Martin de Porres shows us that despite leading complicated lives, the response of discipleship needn't be complicated. In his life we see how authentic love of God gives way to love of neighbor. We see how in loving our neighbor, it proves to be an expression of love for God.

Ask yourself: Are you wondering how to love God? Then love those who most need it. Are you struggling to love your neighbor? Then turn to the God whom you love and ask him to strengthen you in this response.