

In today’s liturgy, the Testaments meet. Both affirm that loving God and loving one another are essential challenges that identify believers and authenticate their faith. However, the love is not about feelings. On the contrary, love is a deliberate decision to serve another regardless of our emotions. This is especially true when it comes to loving our enemies, real or perceived (Mt. 5:43-48). In today’s Gospel, Jesus agrees that the challenge set forth by the author of Deuteronomy is indeed the believer’s first obligation: loving God with one’s whole self, heart, soul, mind and strength. Jesus who came to fulfill the law, pairs the love of God with love of neighbor. Although the laws are numbered “first” and “second,” they are, in truth, only one. Love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated; rather they are mutually complimentary and interdependent.

But what does such love look like? Surely it can be seen in the acts of kindness, of self-sacrificing service that, hopefully, are part of each of our daily lives for example all of the efforts being expended to assist the people on the East Coast following this past week’s massive storm. But for these expressions of love to ring true there is an additional aspect which we must consider when it comes to loving God and our neighbor. And that is how we speak to and about each other.

For quite some time now I have seriously reflected on the relationship between words and deeds. While I can, and hopefully do, engage in actions of kindness, compassion, and justice, do those same qualities evidence themselves in the tenor and words that I speak. As I listen to and read much of what passes for conversation about the pressing issues of our day and the persons and personalities connected to them I experience far too often that rather than seriously discussing and civilly debating them, we as a culture through the media choose to resort to words which vilify, demean, and in many ways assassinate the character and person of another human being. Sadly such a lack of respect for the life and person of another has also seeped into our Catholic community. Today it is not unusual to hear individual bishops or priests being judged and even condemned as “orthodox” or “non-orthodox”, faithful or non-faithful Catholics, by

the application of very narrow subjective criteria in privately owned media outlets run by Catholic individuals or groups across the theological spectrum. It is not unusual to hear cries that such individuals or groups be “excommunicated” because they are not “faithful Catholics.” This is not to say that the church should embrace a secular model of tolerance embracing all values and lifestyles as morally neutral. No, the Scriptures and Jesus propose and call us to values and a life style that often will put us at odds with the world, values and lifestyles that all of us struggle to live in their fullness. If we hold up Jesus as the model for human life and claim the name “Christians” as his followers what witness do our words we use in talking about the issues in the wider world and in the church and to each other give to those outside the faith?

This past summer St. Paul in the letter to Ephesians reminded us: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were sealed for the day of redemption. All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with malice. Be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ” (Ep. 4:30-32). In his letter to the Galatians he bluntly says: If you go on biting and tearing one another to pieces, beware, you will end up in mutual destruction.” (Gal. 5:14,15)

In his address opening the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago Blessed Pope John XXIII, speaking to the assembled bishops as he opened the Council, spoke about the church’s mission of proclaiming the truth of the gospel in our contemporary world. In carrying out her divine mission the Holy Father stated rather than hurling words of judgment and condemnation the church (and by extension we her members) “prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy.” Blessed John XXIII’s plea is the same challenge of today’s readings summarized in these words from the first letter of John: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the command we have from Jesus: Whomever loves God must also love his brother.” (I Jn.4:20,21)