

In this election year, especially in the last days before voting, political candidates try to reduce their message to 30-second sound bites or to a bumper sticker. The truth is, we tend to remember catchy phrases more than complex ideas anyway, but it's hard to reduce a message without sacrificing some of its meaning.

But that's what the teacher of the law was asking Jesus to do in today's gospel. The scribe was asking Jesus to reduce the 613 commandments in the Old Testament to the one law that was the most important and the number one law to follow. "Teacher, he asked, "which commandment is first of all the others?"

In other words, he was asking Jesus to give him (and us) a bumper sticker slogan. And to his amazement, Jesus does just that. But in the process, Jesus gives him more than what was asked for.

Jesus' answer was simple. "This is the first; you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and with all your strength." Then love your neighbor as yourself.

The first law came from Deuteronomy, our first reading, and the second law came from the book of Leviticus.

But what's really important is that Jesus made these two laws into one. In a sense, Jesus is saying that our love for God and our love for our neighbor must be in the form of a cross.

Our love must be vertical; that is, it must reach up all the way to God.

+Rich Tatum writes about their eight-year-old son who was lounging and reading on the couch one morning when he discovered a new word. "What does ponder mean?" Tatum was not sure when he last used that word and wished for a dictionary. He was thinking that if he doesn't nail the odd impromptu definition perfectly, you always hear about it later—and regret it!

So, he told him, "Ponder means you're wondering or thinking about things. Like, you might say, 'I'm pondering the meaning of life.'" Too late, he realized his mistake. Mentioning "the meaning of life" would only lead into one of those twisty, theological discussions whereby he to finish the discussion by saying, "I don't know; it's a mystery!" (MY dad used to that rather often!)

But to his humbled surprise, his son was way ahead of him. "I already know what the meaning of life is," he said. "It's to love God!"

Love God, unconditionally in every aspect of our lives; to surrender. The reality is, that we have these pockets of rebellion in our hearts where we resist God and do not surrender to him in love. We love him to some extent, but we keep him out of those certain areas.

+Consider money. I once saw a cartoon entitled "The baptism," where the person is completely underwater except for one hand, which is still sticking out of the water. Clutched in that hand is the person's wallet.

+C.S. Lewis points out, though, that when we truly love God with all our heart and soul, then we will love one another all the more. In his words, “When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now.”

Secondly, our love must also be horizontal; that is, it must reach out all the way to our neighbors. We cannot choose to love God and at the same time be unconcerned for humankind because in that way, we are not truly loving God.

+Ed Stow wrote to the magazine *Christian Reader* how a young teen was able to grasp this love of neighbor. He said that during the Sunday sermon his pastor quoted “Love your neighbor as yourself.” To emphasize the point, he asked three times, with increasing intensity: “Who is my neighbor? Who is my neighbor? Who is my neighbor?!”

Each time he asked, the young boy behind him answered (mimicking the pastor's intensity, but not quite as loud): “Mister Rogers! Mister Rogers! Mister Rogers!”

Jesus shows us that these two loves cannot be separated. If they are, then our love is incomplete. If I say that I love God with all my heart and soul, then I must also be able to say I love you with all my heart and soul! (But do we always have to like one another every time!)

When you come to think about it, love is a strange command. Other commandments are precise. We know what it means to steal, to lie, to kill, to commit adultery, but the command to love God and our neighbor is so open-ended, it's kind of vague.

It's hard to put love into precise rules and regulations. We need some images of loving that can guide and help us understand the ways of love.

Let's ponder some of the images of love from Jesus' own life and apply it in our own lives; When he changed water into wine at a wedding reception to save the couple from being embarrassed.

*I remember my dad telling me how he took out a former pastor ours for dinner only to realize that at the end of dinner he had left his wallet. He made an excuse and went back to the manager to trust him that he would pay later. He did and saved my dad a heap of embarrassment.

Jesus hung out with outcasts and sinners. Maybe Mr. or Miss Popular can reach out the kid who is always alone or look after those going in the wrong direction.

Or on the cross when Jesus cried out in his pain, “Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing.” Sometimes we have to learn to forgive in the midst of our pain drawing grace from God to do so, thus forming a cross: We need God above to help us in our pain forgive our neighbor.

So here is my bumper sticker for this homily. It is a quote from St. Augustine of Hippo. He says, “Love God and do what you will.”