

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – October 29, 2017
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Now that baseball season is over, for Cardinal fans at least, it's time for football. I realize that some of you have been in a football mood for a while at this point, but it finally has my attention. Football – whether high school, college or professional – has its own unique style. Even more than luck, success in football comes from a combination of brute force, natural talent and calculated strategy. Coaches and players devise passing and rushing plays meant to skillfully sidestep and thoroughly confuse their opponent's defense. That's not easy because by this point in the season, scouts and camera crews have recorded every play, and defensive coaches have memorized every formation and have devised a better way to counterattack. And so every head coach worth his salt has in his playbook that one trick play – that “Statue of Liberty” play that will surprise the opponents only once – but maybe once will be enough to win the game. Yes, every coach, every team, holds back that something special, that something valuable *just in case* they need it.

In that respect, at least, football is not much different than life. We all hold something back, save something for a rainy day. Whether it is the savings account we don't touch except in an emergency, or the cab fare we keep in our pocket lest we find ourselves stranded, the uncertainties of life have taught us to be prepared for any contingency. We purchase property and casualty insurance. We buy candles and batteries in case the power goes out. We diversify our portfolio – if we are fortunate enough to have any portfolio at all. We hedge our bets. And all of that makes good sense. Our country is stronger and more secure when we stand prepared, when we are ready. The problem arises when we carry what makes good sense in one arena into the other areas of our lives. It is one thing to for us to protect ourselves from economic disaster by holding some money back. It is quite another to protect ourselves from the pain and heartache love can bring by holding back on commitment, for example, or by giving our loved ones only that portion of our emotional selves that we feel we can risk.

In the gospel today, Jesus tells us that love is the greatest commandment – love of God and love of neighbor. And that should come as no surprise to us. Love is probably the most popular topic in human conversation. There are more songs, poems, dramas and comedies written about love than about all other subjects combined. Love dominates the human psyche, so why should our relationship with God be an exception? But the commandment is not of some half-hearted kind of love. We are not called to love God in the same way that we love

baseball or football, or even the same way we love family or friends. We appreciate things with an understanding that they are not to consume our lives. We love people with plenty of room for others – and we often protect ourselves from a broken heart by leaving ourselves an out. There are often parts of ourselves – feelings and fears and emotions – that we won't share with anyone else – not our spouse, not our best friend, not even with our God. We hold back because we are afraid of being laughed at, or of being thought less of, or of being hurt by disclosure. And with our brothers and sisters, these fears are real. Human beings are fallible and sooner or later they will disappoint us. So we naturally hold something back. We naturally protect ourselves.

But look at the gospel more closely. The commandments he gives us are not just the greatest – they are in many ways the most difficult. Jesus did not say love God but protect yourself from being hurt just in case. The savior does not ask us to love God with most of our heart and most of our soul and most of our mind. No, Jesus commands us to love God fully, completely with **all** of our heart, and **all** of our soul and **all** of our mind. He implicitly instructs us to hold nothing back from God, but that is something we find very difficult to do. Our human experience tells us that if we love completely we will be disappointed, that someone will always let us down. Friends we thought we could count on sometimes mysteriously turn away. Family members who should help us instead lash out at us for reasons we cannot imagine. Even priests and others who come in the name of God disappoint us by their words or their actions or their omissions. So why should we trust God when those made in his image have proven themselves untrustworthy? Because God is different. Human beings constantly disappoint us – God never will. Human beings prove time and again that they are imperfect, but God is perfect. Human love is but an imitation of God's love, while Scripture tells us that God is love itself and Jesus Christ is love in the flesh.

To follow Jesus completely – to be a true Christian – we must open our hearts completely to God – allowing him to gently enter and heal especially those parts of our heart and our soul and our mind that we are ashamed of, those parts where we feel most vulnerable. To be vulnerable before the Lord is to recognize that God can be trusted, that we need not hedge our bets with God – for God will never disappoint us.