

I have birthdays on my mind. As some of you know, I recently celebrated my 35th birthday. Back when I was a kid, one of the special parts of birthday celebrations was the birthday sign. My mom made the sign by hand for years and then she upgraded to making them using the greeting card software on the computer. It was always fun to see what design she would come up with. They were always themed according to something that was going on in your life. One year I was doing acting in a bunch of theatrical shows, so my sign featured drama masks. Another sign featured a computer, as I am a techie. There was a new theme every birthday and it was always a treat to come down for breakfast on my birthday and see the sign that my mom had made hanging on the wall. It would continue to hang there throughout the week.

Another thing came to mind as I was pondering today's readings: the moon! Now if you're wondering what connects my mom's birthday sign and the moon, stick with me. I haven't looked at the moon the same since reading a great book by Eric Metaxas titled, *Miracles: What They Are, Why They Happen, and How They Can Change Your Life*. In the book, Metaxas starts out by focusing on the miracles that we take for granted all around us, like the miracle of the moon. Have you ever stopped to consider how unusual our moon is? For one, our moon is too big for our planet. Usually, a planet the size of earth would have a smaller moon, but somehow we have a larger moon. And not only that, but that moon is perfectly positioned so that at various points, from the perspective of earth's surface, the moon completely hides the sun, creating an eclipse. This is an extraordinary phenomenon. The distance between the earth, moon and sun is so perfectly aligned that every once in a while a total eclipse happens, from our human perspective. Along with Eric Metaxas, I recognize this as a miracle, a sign from our loving God showing that He cares about us. He cares enough to give us a weird-sized moon that every once in a while gives us a spectacular show in the sky!

With both my mom's birthday signs and the moon, we see tokens of love. Those birthday signs were so special to me because they represented the love of my mom. That gift of love was the final product of my mom

spending time carefully crafting it just for me. In this and many other ways I came to know of my mom's love for me and had the opportunity over and over in my life to respond to her love. So it is with our Heavenly Father. All around us are signs of His extravagant, infinite love for us: the moon, the stars, the beautiful fall colors, rainbows, our pets, our loved ones and our own lives. God's love is so intense that He came to tell us about Himself and draw us back to Him even after we had rejected countless times. As Christians, we have the greatest token of love in the Cross of Jesus and all of the graces which flow from it. Today at Mass we will have the opportunity to eat of the Bread of Life, to consume the gift of God Himself and be consumed by this Gift. Praise God! Each of us is surrounded by tokens both great and small of the love of God. Each of these call us to a response, to give ourselves in love to the One who has loved us from all eternity, and then give ourselves to others.

In the Gospel, a scribe asks Jesus which is the first of all the commandments, that is, which one is most important. Jesus responds in a way which takes us to the heart of all the commandments. He says that the first commandment is:

Hear, O Israel!

The Lord our God is Lord alone!

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul,
with all your mind,
and with all your strength.

Here Jesus is quoting a prayer known as the *shema* which had been with the people of Israel for centuries, going back to Moses. The first reading from Deuteronomy shows us Moses giving this beautiful prayer to the people as a reminder to them of God's care for them. He teaches them this prayer just as they are getting ready to cross into the promised land which God wanted to give them. The prayer starts with reminding them that "the Lord our God is Lord alone." The one God, and not any false God, had delivered them from Egypt and brought them through the desert to the promised land because of His great love. That incredible love of God calls for a response: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” From an early age, Jews were taught this prayer. They would recite it multiple times a day.

So when Jesus quotes this as the first commandment, the scribe and other Jews would have known just what he was talking about. They may have even said it along with Him. But then He goes a step farther. He connects that great prayer and the commandment of total love of God to the love of neighbor. He says, “The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.” Jesus holds both of these commandments together--the love of God and love of neighbor, because by God’s design they are inseparable. Unless we first know the incredible love of God and respond to it, we cannot begin to properly love our neighbor as ourselves.

The *shema* prayer begins with an important direction: hear! The first step of loving God as we should is to be receptive to Him. God is constantly looking to speak to us, if only we would listen. So often we fail to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength because we haven’t let Him love us first; we haven’t stopped to pay attention to all the ways God wants to speak to our hearts of His love: we haven’t slowed down to appreciate the grandeur of nature, we haven’t made time to really listen to God’s Word every day, we haven’t come to Mass with hearts open to encounter the risen Jesus in the Eucharist. Too often, we don’t hear Him because we aren’t listening. Think of how it would have damaged my relationship with my Mom if on my birthday I didn’t even look at the birthday sign she made for me!

Unless we first experience the incredible love of God for us, we cannot begin to understand who we are and what we’re made for. And if we have a warped sense of ourselves, we won’t properly love ourselves, and thus won’t properly love others.

But if we recognize all these signs around us of God’s love and begin to respond back to Him with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength, we will

begin to truly live. As Christians, our response of love helps us remember who we are, that deep down, our identity is as God's beloved children. And we pray that more and more would be drawn to Baptism so as to live as beloved sons and daughters of our Father in Heaven. When we receive the Father's love, it shows us the truth about ourselves: that we are made to love and be loved and that God has poured out His love into us. Knowing this, we see others as "other selves," as people like us who are created and redeemed to share in the Father's love. This allows us to go to them as we should, with the overflowing love we have received from the Father which we can share with them as brothers and sisters.

So my prayer is that this Sunday we all take the time to hear the loving voice of the Father in the many ways He speaks to us, especially from this altar. Let us remember that the Cross shows us the fullness of who God is, that He holds nothing back in loving us. He has given us everything. So let us give ourselves back to Him, holding nothing back as his children so that we can then be filled to overflowing with love for others.

+ Heavenly Father, thank you for your incredible love for us that led You to send us your only begotten Son to save us. Jesus, thank you for giving us the fullest gift of love on the Cross. Help us to stay close to the Cross so that we can love You and our neighbor fully. Holy Spirit, help us to recognize and receive the great love of our Father. Help us right now to open our hearts more fully to receive His love as His children so we can better share that love with our neighbor. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen. +