Scripture
Matthew 22:34-40

Love’s Priority

Above all else, God calls us to love.

† Jesus summarizes the way of love and righteousness in the Great Commandment: we are to love God and one another.
† Young children learn about love best not through talk about love, but through experiences in which they are treated with love. Our first step in showing God’s love to young children is to make sure each child is fully welcomed, just as he or she is.
† Today’s session invites young children to hear Jesus’ teaching through games, art and play.

Question of the Week
When is it easy to love as Jesus asks? When is it hard? Why?

Core Session
† Getting Started (photographs or picture books)
† Gospel Story: The Most Important Rule
† Gospel Chant: Love God, Love Others
† Praying Together

Enrichment
† Discover the Good News
† Singing Together
† Book Corner
† Craft: Heart Mobile (red yarn, embroidery hoop)
† Info: Teaching About Jesus
† Info: Young Children and the Gospel
† Info: Where You’ll Find Everything Else

Helps for Catechists
† More about Today’s Scriptures
† Reflection
† The Scriptures and the Catechism
† The World of the Bible: Pharisees and Sadducees
**Getting Started** (5-15 minutes)
Children discuss relationships. Either bring in pictures of your own family or use picture books that show loving relationships. Any of Margaret Wise Brown’s classic books, such as Runaway Bunny or Good Night, Moon, would work well.

One at a time, show the pictures of loving relationships. For each picture, ask:
- What is happening in this picture?

After talking about the pictures ask:
- Who loves us? Can we name all the people who love us?
- Who do you love? Can you name people you love?

Close by saying:
- Love is very important to Jesus. Listen to what Jesus once said about love.

**Gospel Story** (5 minutes)

*Story Focus: Use the poster of Marcella Paliekara’s Suffering Servant—attached to this document—as a visual focus for today’s story. Tell the children that this is the way one artist imagined what Jesus looked like. Affirm that no one knows what Jesus looked like, so we can all use our imaginations. Today we provide a very short story, then immediately follow it with games that help children chant the main teaching of the story. After the Scripture Games below, you can gather the children in the story area to tell the story a second time.*

**The Most Important Rule**

Many people were asking Jesus questions.

One of them said, “Jesus, there are so many rules! What rule do you think is most important?”

Jesus said, “The most important rule is to love God.

Then Jesus said, “The next most important rule is to love other people.”

“Is that what you want us to do?” asked another person.

“Yes,” said Jesus. “I want you to love God. I want you to love others. Those are the best things to do!”

**Gospel Chant** (10-20 minutes)

*Love God, Love Others*
Children memorize a simple teaching based on today’s gospel.

Sit in a circle with the children. Teach children this chant:

- Love God.
- Love others.

Ask children to clap twice after each line. Then ask children to stand and stamp twice after each line. Ask the children to suggest actions to use after each line; for example:
- snap fingers
- slap legs
- bob up and down

Then choose alternating actions to use with the chant. For example, when the children say, “Love God,” they all stand. When they say, “Love others,” they all sit. Invite children to invent other alternating actions.

Children can also divide into pairs. Each pair can invent clapping patterns, stand-and-sit patterns and turning patterns to use as they practice the chant. For example, one partner can say, “Love God,” and twirl once in place. The other partner responds, “Love others,” and twirls once.

Finally, sit in a circle with the children. Say, “Love God,” and toss the soft toy to another child. The child that catches the toy responds, “Love others.” The child then begins a new round by saying, “Love God,” while tossing the toy to another child.

**Praying Together** (5 minutes)
Invite children to talk spontaneously to God by asking:
- Is there anything you would like to say to God today?

Invite children to thank God for people who love us. Ask children to name such people. Close by praying:
- Thank you, God, for those who love us. Thank you for giving us people to love, too. (Name each child.)
  And, most of all, thank you for sending Jesus to love us. Amen.

**Note:** Distribute this week’s At Home with the Good News to children before they leave, or e-mail it to their parents after the session.
Discover the Good News
(5-10 minutes)
In today’s Discover the Good News, you’ll find a finish-the-card activity children can use to make an out-of-season valentine for a friend or family member.

Singing Together (5-10 minutes)
From Singing the Good News, sing together:
◆ “The Great Commandment” (songbook p. 8, also available as an MP3)
◆ “Reach Out” (songbook p. 7, also available as an MP3)

Note: To access both the songbook and its attached MP3 files, open your Fall-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Singing the Good News.

You can also sing popular hymns that include the word love. Examples:
◆ “Jesus Loves the Little Children”
◆ “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know”
◆ “They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love”

You might make the American Sign Language sign for love each time you sing the word: arms crossed over your chest, suggestive of hugging.

Book Corner (5-15 minutes)
Share books with children on themes related to the day’s stories. The world of children’s literature is rich in books that explore loving relationships.

In the classic bedtime book Runaway Bunny, a mother rabbit assures her small bunny that no matter what, she will always find him and love him. Runaway Bunny is by Margaret Wise Brown, illustrated by Clement Hurd (New York: Harper, 1942).

Mamma, Do You Love Me? echoes this theme in an Inuit setting, with a mother and daughter in loving, teasing dialogue. The book is written by Barbara Joose, illustrated by Barbara Lavallee (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1991).

Craft (10-20 minutes)
Heart Mobile
Cut four hearts for each child from red construction paper.

Each child makes a strand of hearts for the mobile by following these directions:
◆ Cut a length of yarn. (You can suggest that each child measure the yarn by holding one end in a stretched-out hand and the other end at his or her heart.)
◆ Glue two hearts together somewhere on the yarn, sandwiching the yarn between the two hearts.
◆ Repeat for the other two hearts.
◆ Bring your finished yarn to me to hang on the mobile.

As each child brings a completed string to you, help the child touch one heart while saying, “Love God,” then the other while saying, “Love others.” Tie one end of the yarn to an embroidery hoop.

Use extra yarn to make a hanger for the finished mobile.
Teaching about Jesus

This story, like others in our series, assumes that children have at least some knowledge of the words God and Jesus.

If the children in your group do not have such an understanding, you need to explain these words in simple terms. Do not explain them all at the same time. Take one a week, give a very simple explanation, and then add to that gradually over a period of weeks. Here are some suggestions for introductory explanations:

God—God is the One who made the world, the trees and flowers, the sky, the animals, people, everything. God is greater than anything or anyone else. God loves us very much.

Jesus—Jesus is God’s Child, God’s Son. When Jesus lived on earth long ago, he did many things that showed how great God is and how much God loves us. Now Jesus lives with God; we cannot see or touch Jesus but we know he is our Friend.

Young Children and the Gospel

Our session today is based on the great commandment. When Jesus is asked what law takes precedence, he teaches that love of God is the most important priority of our lives. The second is love of others.

We introduce preschoolers and kindergartners to this law directly with simple repetitive activities that help young children memorize the essence of Jesus’ teaching. Other activities encourage children to play with this teaching.

As you choose activities for today’s session, keep in mind that preschoolers and kindergartners can best learn loving relationships during free play. In free play preschoolers and kindergartners practice these and other social skills:

◆ Children learn how to enter a group; that is, a child who wants to join a game must find a way to be accepted by the group already playing.

◆ Children learn how to sustain play; that is, children who want to continue play with others must find a way to accommodate their playmates’ wishes as well as their own.

◆ Children learn how to manage conflict; that is, children must find a way to protect their own desires as well as respect the boundaries of others.

All these tasks require such skills as communication, empathy, negotiation and risk-taking. Be sure to provide plenty of time and materials for free play in your room. As a rule of thumb, 4-year-olds need to spend about 40-50% of each session period in free play; 5-year-olds need about 20-25%.

Where You’ll Find Everything Else

◆ Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
  — Backgrounds and reflections for today’s readings, titled More about Today’s Scriptures.
  — Today’s Gospel Story, to distribute or e-mail to children and their families.
  — Suggestions for exploring Our Parish.
  — Directions for three alternative Story-Review Games.
  — Paliekara’s Suffering Servant, to be used in today’s Gospel Story.
  — Today’s At Home with the Good News, to distribute or e-mail to families after the session.

◆ Open your Fall-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Seasonal Articles to find:
  — Information on Fall-A’s Models of the Faith.
  — A reproducible handout titled Sharing Our Story.
  — A reproducible handout titled Sharing God’s Word at Home.
More about Today's Scriptures

Today's readings highlight love as the greatest of God's commandments. In Exodus, God's commands demonstrate a priority of justice and compassion. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul affirms that their belief and service have become a model of faith to other believers. In the gospel, Jesus tells us that the greatest and first commandment is to love God.

Exodus 22:20-26

Today's reading comes from a section (20:22–23:19) often called “the book of the covenant” (24:7). It is a legal code that combines two kinds of materials: direct commands in the second person (like the 10 Commandments), and case laws describing situations and penalties.

This reading is a set of commands based upon appeal to Israel's own experience as a stranger, to the covenant relationship between God and Israel, and to God's own compassionate nature.

All those who had no familial protection were entrusted to God's care, which the community had to recognize or God would avenge them for any wrong done.

Special care for strangers (those forced from a homeland by war, famine, plague or bloodguilt and living fairly permanently in Israel with no legal status), the widow or orphan who often wound up outside the protection of a patriarchal household is a recurrent theme.

As a farming people, Israel was uncomfortable with mercantile arrangements and prohibited the taking of interest from a fellow Israelite, especially the poor. The “cloak” (v. 26) taken in pledge was used as an overcoat and as a sleeping mat; if retained by a creditor, its loss left the poor exposed.

1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10

Today's reading begins with Paul's description of the powerful reception of the gospel among the Thessalonians and a reminder of the witness Paul and his companions presented. Since Christians Paul serve as examples of Christ to one another, Paul is not afraid to name himself along with Jesus as a model for imitation.

Finally, he reminds them of his message to them, which was first a call to monotheism (v. 9). Then Paul gives a Christological statement, explaining Jesus' identity, followed by a statement about the coming judgment (v. 10).

Matthew 22:34-40

Today's reading contains the third of the controversy stories that show Jesus' ability to confute his opponents. The law of Moses as set forth in the first five books of the Bible had, over the passage of centuries, been codified into 613 commandments. The question was often raised whether they were all of equal weight.

Rabbis commonly replied to the question posed to Jesus by citing the second part of his answer (Leviticus 19:18b). The first part is taken from the morning prayer recited by Jews called the Shema (from the Hebrew word for “hear”), which opened the quote from Deuteronomy 6:5.

This prayer expressed the central faith of Judaism. The inclusion of “mind” (v. 37) may be an alternate translation for Gentiles of “heart,” which, in Jewish understanding, was the core of a person, the center of thought and will and emotion.

The conjunction of the two Old Testament texts occurs infrequently in rabbinical writing. It may have been original with Jesus. Each commandment is to be understood in the light of the other. Paul quotes the second as the fulfillment of the law, an assertion echoed by other New Testament writers. Matthew has also prepared for its importance by stressing it earlier (5:43-48; 19:16-19).

Reflection

The art of condensation was summed up by Blaise Pascal who told a friend, “if I had more time, I'd write you a shorter letter.” In today's gospel, Jesus reduced the 613 commandments of his day to the most essential two. We who also feel overwhelmed by multiple rules and regulations should be grateful for his simplicity.
By weaving together the laws from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, Jesus shows the careful grounding of our love for each other in our love for God. Human love is naturally limited and flawed. God shows us how to love: radically and extravagantly. If we try to love our neighbors in this way, we’re on the right path.

Furthermore, Jesus points out the close connection between the two loves: the second is like the first. We don’t divide our attentions between God and humans: they make up one flow.

We must also heed the command to love ourselves. Do we nurture spirits and bodies with enough exercise and rest, good nutrition, stimulating reading and the kinds of activity that bring us alive? If we sink into “martyrdom,” we’re likely to become crabby, not the vibrant Christians people want to be around.

The Scriptures and the Catechism
The great commands to love God and our neighbor are the foundation of our kingdom community (CCC, #1822–29, 1878, 2055, 2084–2141, 2196). Our fidelity and service to our trinitarian God is what distinguishes Christians from all other religions (CCC, #232–67). Although we share a belief that there is only one God with Jews and Muslims, our one God is also three-personed and theirs is not (CCC, #212–13, 222–27, 253–56).

The World of the Bible
Pharisees and Sadducees
The Pharisees were an influential party existing within Judaism during the time of Jesus and early Christianity. Historically, the Pharisees’ origins are obscure, but they are well established by 167 BC at the time of the Jewish revolt by the Maccabees against their Greek oppressors.

The Pharisees were a lay group, not priests, who were characterized by their zeal for the Jewish law. In Jesus’ time, they were influential among the ordinary people because they were living examples of what every Jew was called upon to do.

They believed that since the law was God’s revealed guideline for them, it should be followed as perfectly as possible in every detail of ordinary life. Not all Jews agreed with their approach, because the Pharisees recognized as authoritative not only the written law (that found in the first five books of the Bible which are called the Torah or in Greek the Pentateuch) but also the many interpretations of this written law given by generations of scholarly commentators.

The Pharisees’ devotion to the law was also the root of their problems. Their religious lifestyle demanded so much that a sense of elitism developed. Their observance of the law not only made them separate (the word Pharisee means “the separate ones”), but hardened their attitude toward those who did not keep the law as completely. Their approach often led to a legalistic concern for outward observance.

The Sadducees were a small religious group or party within Judaism. Drawn from the priestly and higher social classes, many Sadducees were members of the chief judicial council (the Sanhedrin). Conservative in both politics and religion, the Sadducees accepted as scripture only the written Law and rejected the Pharisees’ adoption of the unwritten traditions. They urged peaceful collaboration with the Romans because of their concern for the Jerusalem temple as the religious and the financial center for Judaism. So they were often accused of undesirable compromises in order to retain their power. The Sadducees disappeared as a group in AD 70 when Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans and its temple was destroyed.

“For now I wish only to explain that the Pharisees transmit to the people some rules in line with the fathers, which were not written in the laws of Moses. And because of this, the line of the Sadducees reject these things. They say that it is necessary to hold those rules that have been written but it is not (necessary) to observe what is (only) from the fathers’ tradition. And, as a consequence, controversies and great disagreements have occurred between them.”

—Josephus
Antiquities 12.297