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You shall love your neighbor as yourself

-- The vision statement of our parish has one sentence that reads: *Members of St. Caspar's will be eager to extend a helping hand to those in our community, our nation or anywhere in the world who are in need of assistance.*

-- We also read in our council guidelines that part of the mission of the universal Church and parish alike is to heal and liberate the captive in the name of Jesus.

-- Obviously, these are daunting tasks. There's no way one parish can begin to address all those needs. But each parish (and, by extension, each Christian) must do something to address these challenges. Our council is starting to talk about that.

-- "Loving your neighbor" is not just about being nice to the people in our neighborhood, or bringing a casserole to a friend having a family funeral. Yes, those are good things, but the scriptures give us a larger picture.

-- The code of law in the Book of Exodus gives us some concrete examples: *You shall not molest or oppress an alien... You shall not wrong any widow or orphan... You shall not demand interest from your poor neighbor.*

-- In other words, our first obligation is to look out for the poor, the powerless and those who are particularly vulnerable. At a minimum, we are not to take advantage of them.

-- Our new bishop set a good example, serving at the Helping Hands food kitchen the first time he visited our diocese.

-- I think we can take two current issues to put flesh and bones on this challenge. One is the question of interest rates. I don't pretend to be an expert on how the Church dealt with this over history.

- And even, for example, Muslims who take the prohibition against interest literally have banks and need to charge fees to do business.
- But we ought to ask: Are we as outraged at people who charge more interest to the poor than the well-off as we are to those who oppress the widow and the orphan?
- That ought to put the issue of high interest “payday loans” in a different perspective than “It’s just business.”
- When Moses’ law says *You shall not molest or oppress an alien*, that brings the immigration issue to mind today. Of course, the Bible and our faith don’t give us a detailed plan to put forth for our own country.
- But it does raise the question of attitudes. When we see people trying to come to our country as freeloaders, or taking away our jobs, or somehow less than human, what does that say? After all, most of us are descendants of people who came to this country seeking a better life.
- Loving your neighbor isn’t primarily about feelings. It’s about practical action. It’s about what we do as individuals, as a parish, as a community, as a country.
- We can’t do everything, but we can do something. We can allow biblical values to inform the way we approach voting on issues and candidates. We can try to be informed as best we can.
- And we can make some small effort to reach out. Perhaps we can get involved in a Habitat for Humanity Project. Or we can become more informed about the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which helps empower the poor.
- Those are just examples. And we also do need to be attentive to needs that might arise in our neighborhoods and communities.
- God’s word gives us a “lens” through which we can see the needs of those around us. Love enables us to respond to those needs in some way.

-- Will that unselfish love be the standard by which we live our lives?