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I think when we hear this Gospel and we're challenged by these two commandments, our tendency is probably not to think too much about that first commandment about loving God because God is such a mystery. God is a spirit. How do we show affection through spirit life? How do we love someone when we have no ability to truly understand and to know? So we go to the second commandment and think about how we love our neighbor as ourselves and challenge ourselves about that commandment.

But I think it's probably more important to really try to follow up on the first commandment: "Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole mind, all of your strength." How can we do that? First of all, I think it helps if we remind ourselves again of that passage in the first letter of John where John tells the first Christian community to whom he's writing, "My dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God ... for God is love."

Then John goes on to say, "And this is the love I mean: not that we loved God, but that God first loved us and God sent Jesus to be one of us." If we reflect on that quietly for a few minutes every day and just think: God first loved us, God first loved me. Before I could ever love God, God loved me into existence, and God continues to support me by God's constant love. If you think about it deeply enough, you realize that none of us would be here except that God is love and God loves us into being, and God continues to love us every instant of our lives.

God will love us forever, into eternity, everlasting life. That's who God is — God is love. It's an act of love, not just being kind. God is always acting — loving us, supporting us, holding us in existence. The deeper we let that realization sink into our consciousness, I think then we begin to respond with love for God, which is most of all gratitude, thanksgiving. Everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God. Every moment we need to be thankful.

In one of Paul's letters, he tells the Christians, "Be eucharists." The word "eucharist" means thanksgiving. So Paul is saying your whole being needs to be thanksgiving. Loving God means to thank God every instant because God loves us every instant. As we begin to develop that kind of love for God where we're deeply aware of God's love for us, then that love begins to overflow onto our brothers and sisters. It happens here in this community.

Yesterday we had a funeral. It was beautiful. The church was filled. It was a very large family to start with, but [with] friends and community members, and you felt the love of God in this community. Every Sunday when I come here and celebrate Eucharist, I feel the love of God because this is a community that has been built over many years through its pastoral leadership on love. So you are doing what Jesus commands us. But then it's still important to review in some detail how that love that we share for others or that we pour forth upon others is carried out in the concrete.

Even though our first lesson today, part of the book of Exodus, was written thousands of years ago in totally different circumstances for the chosen people, it reads as an admonition to us today of how we must examine whether we are loving our neighbor: "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Whom is the writer speaking about? Immigrants. In our country, there's such a strong feeling against immigration — building walls, keeping them out. That's failure in the love of our neighbor. We might ask ourselves how much has that spirit that is being pushed in our country infected my feelings?

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We're a nation of immigrants and yet, there's this strong turning against them. It's totally against love of neighbor or the most vulnerable: "You shall not harm the widow or the orphan," those who are vulnerable in any way, not able to make it on their own. Are we really reaching out to them with our social programs of support and help for the poor, the vulnerable? "If you lend money to any people who are poor, do not act like a moneylender. Do not charge interest." That's unheard of in our country.

We build our whole economic system on just the opposite. We make money off money. "If you take a person's cloak as a pledge (I'll keep this until you pay me back), return it that night because the poor person needs it to keep warm." That's the kind of love that God is teaching the chosen people. That's the kind of love that we must try, in some way, to bring into our own lives if we're going to love our neighbor as ourselves according to the second of the great commandments: "Love God with your whole heart, your whole mind, your whole spirit, and love your neighbor as yourself."

Find the concrete ways (these are only suggestions) in which we pour forth out of gratitude for what God has given to me, for one another. It's a huge challenge, actually. Sometimes people say to love God; that's easy. No, it's very difficult to love God with that spirit of total gratitude and then to love our neighbor as ourselves.

As we celebrate this Eucharist, we must pray that we really hear God's message today and like those people in Thessalonica, we begin to carry it out so that our Christian community here and throughout our country will be an example to what should happen in regard to our brothers and sisters. The love of God will lead to love of neighbor. We pray that we can begin to accept and follow these two commandments.

[Homily given Oct. 15 at St. Philomena Church in Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are [posted weekly](#) to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]