

Another commandment: Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

by [Maria Teresa Palmer](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

I read this week's lectionary passages last summer in the Urubamba Valley in my native Peru, and in my native Spanish: "*Pero Cristo ya vino, y ahora el es el Sumo sacerdote . . .*" At first I resisted the Hebrews passage, as I prefer Jesus' concrete teachings to more abstract theological concepts. So, while leading a tour group across the Andes, I turned to Mark: "And man must love God with all his heart and with all his mind and with all his strength; and he must love his neighbor as he loves himself."

I can picture this scene unfolding in Peru. I can imagine Jesus at my parents' house, surrounded by my family and friends. Although these are people who try to do what's right, Jesus' revolutionary ideas would make them uneasy. I can hear one of my cousins asking Jesus, in all seriousness: "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus tells him compassionately, "Loving God and loving others as much as you love yourself"—an answer that can be understood anywhere in the world, an answer that we still find compelling.

The problem is not that we don't know the answer, but that it's so difficult to live up to that commandment. In Lima, where inequality and poverty are visible around every corner, Jesus' answer is a radical call, one that pushes us beyond even the good works that we are doing. Many of us, after all, are involved in charities and ministries to others. In those efforts we come "close to the kingdom of God," but there most of us stop, just short of actively pursuing for others all we want for ourselves: a home, a car, insurance, clean water, schooling, warm clothes, health care.

I studied this scripture while touring Peruvian churches. I saw amazing silver and gold altars and incredible paintings, jeweled communion cups and other sacred art that attest to the love that churchpeople have lavished on God for many centuries.

It was more difficult to find evidence of love for others. But at one small altar in a church's side chapel stood the image of San Martin de Porres, dressed in humble robes. Under the image burned dozens of candles. "Martin," our tour guide

explained, “was the illegitimate son of a freed slave and a Spaniard. He didn’t have the money or position to join a religious order, so he presented himself as an offering to the order. He just wanted to serve God. His good deeds were legendary; he started an orphanage and a hospital, even though he was little more than a slave.”

How could the child of a slave, raised in poverty in a racist and classist society, love God so totally and unconditionally and ask nothing but the privilege of service?

Later, as our tour group rested in Cuzco’s Plaza de Armas, a crowd began to form. Workers’ unions and agrarian cooperatives had called for a national demonstration in opposition to the Free Trade Agreement. When we saw the angry signs that read: “People-eating Americans: Leave our community!” we decided that it was prudent to move on. I started gathering my group to leave, but some of the demonstrators cornered me. “Why do Americans want to ruin our farms?” asked a poor farmer who thrashes wheat by hand every summer. He produces enough to subsist on but has heard about “what happened to the small farmers in Mexico.” I assured them that most U.S. farmers have no idea what the FTA will do to small farmers in Cuzco. They asked me to use my influence to tell farmers about their brothers and sisters in the Urubamba Valley. “We have children too,” one woman told me. “We don’t want them to starve.”

I promised to pray and to speak out. The crowd laughed when I asked them to pray for us, but I insisted. To do what’s right by all the world’s farmers, I told them, the brothers and sisters in the U.S. are going to need God’s guidance. We’re going to have to learn to listen and to consider how our actions, our policies, our laws affect all peoples—something that is not easy to do. One woman promised to pray each day, and I thought of San Martin. He would have been concerned about our inability to care for the poor, to follow the servant Christ. He would have prayed for us. He would have prayed as he was commanded, wanting for us what he wanted for himself: knowing the love of God to the point of joyful, selfless service.

Christ was asked to cite the most important commandment. If he had stopped at “Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart,” we could be satisfied with building glorious churches, creating amazing worship services and giving extravagant offerings. But Christ gave a second commandment—the corollary of loving God, its indispensable application: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus tells us that we are called to do for the poor farmer in Cuzco, the inner-city

gang member, the undocumented worker and the pregnant teen what we would want done if we were in their places. Most of us don't know if we are capable of such selflessness.

As I pondered our ability and inability to love, I returned to the Hebrews passage. The only way I can make sense of Jesus' commandment is to focus on redemption. As if intoning a beloved hymn, I remind myself: "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!"

Then I pray for my sisters and brothers who are welcoming spring in the Urubamba valley.