

Who Is My Neighbor

July 11, 2010

Luke 10:25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

²⁵On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

²⁷He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

²⁸"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

³⁰In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

³⁶"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

³⁷The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."
Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

This is the Word of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Lord, make us a channel of your peace, that where there is hatred, we may bring love; that where there is wrong, we may bring the spirit of forgiveness; that where there is discord, we may bring harmony; that where there is error, we may bring truth; that where there is doubt, we may bring faith; that where there is despair, we may bring hope; that where there are shadows, we may bring light; that where there is sadness, we may bring joy. Lord, grant that we may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted; to understand, than to be understood; to love, than to be loved. For it is by forgetting ourselves that we are able to find. It is by forgiving that we are able to be forgiven. It is by dying that we are awakened to Eternal Life. Amen! (Adapted from the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi)

In our reading today we are confronted with one of the most familiar parables of Jesus' teachings, that is, the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. Immediately our attention should be drawn to the word *Samaritan* here because it is a topic that has been reoccurring during the past few weeks. Recall, if you will, that Samaritans are the people most despised by the Jews and whenever we are confronted with these people in recounting the teachings of Christ, we are to pay close attention to what is being said. When the Samaritans come into play, we dealing with the most marginalized of the time and if the lessons we are being taught have anything to do with the Samaritans, then we can be assured that the lesson we are being offered in going to be a good one; one that is full of the message of *radical inclusivity*.

In briefly looking back over the readings of the past few weeks, another theme comes to mind. Not only are we being taught about our responsibilities of discipleship, but we are being instructed to "Go" and take care of business.

- Luke 7:36 – 8:3 tells us that Jesus is anointed by a sinful woman. In this reading she is told that her faith has healed her and she is instructed to "Go in peace!" This reading taught us that *Love has no limits*.
- Luke 8:26-39 tells us that in the region of the Gerasenes, Jesus heals a demon-possessed man. Here the people of the town are content with keeping this man at bay, continuing to marginalize him from their society. They are afraid of him, and rightly so; the man is possessed by some incomprehensible number of demons. Once healed by Jesus, he is instructed to *go*, to "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." This reading taught us that *There is hope in Christ*.
- Luke 9:51 – 62 taught us that we should *Keep our eyes on the Path* that God has laid out for each of us. We are reminded in this reading that we are not called to "Follow Christ" but rather to bring the *radically inclusive message of love* to all those we encounter. "The dead are called to bury their own dead", Jesus says, and we are instructed to "Go and proclaim the kingdom of God."
- Alas, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 tells that Jesus does not call us to go anywhere that he himself is not willing to travel as he sends out the seventy-two to all the places that he is about to go. The joy that

we gain from carrying out the commands and instructions of Christ allow us to *Rejoice in our Call*, and rightly so. There is joy to be found in the service of our Creator. But all is not without its distractions and dangers. Christ command to his disciples is this, “Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.” We are not promised that the path before us is going to always be smooth, but we are promised that Christ will walk that path with us.

If I were charged with giving a name to these series of lessons and teachings we have encountered over the past few weeks, I would probably choose a verse from today’s reading; “Go and do likewise.” (v. 37) How often we forget that the teachings of Christ are more than stories to enlighten us or to make us feel better about ourselves and our relationship with our Creator, but the stories are indeed a call to action; instructions on how we are to live a life reflective of our relationship with our Creator and reflective of the call to which each of us, as Children of God, have been charged.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is another of those Bible stories that teaches us about action and probably more clearly so than some others we have encountered. Though each of the stories before this one instructs us to “Go,” it is easy for us to ignore the command. Maybe it is because we, as stated so many times before from this altar, have grown accustomed to our daily lives and routines. We don’t feel compelled to *go* in the way that Christ instructs us to do so because we have grown comfortable in our routines. It is this same sinful way of living that motivates the first two passersby in our reading today to move beyond the one in need without any hesitation to do something to help this individual. But I am getting ahead of myself just a bit. Let’s look at what leads up to this parable told by Jesus and get our bearings before we continue.

Recall that Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. We are transitioning from the ministry portion of Jesus journey to the pinnacle of his incarnation. Together we are journeying to the cross and learning as much as we can about what it means to gain life in death. We are told here that, “On one occasion, an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.” (v. 25a) It was not uncommon for Jesus to encounter opposition from the religious leaders of his time, especially the type of opposition that sought to discredit him.

“Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the law?” [Jesus] replied. “How do you read it?”

[The expert in the law] responded: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; (Deuteronomy 6:5) and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Leviticus 19:18)” (vv. 25b – 27)

These are good words; words that we as Christians should be familiar with. Aren’t we comforted by the fact that it is our love for our God, the love for our Creator that ensures us relationship and in turn eternal life? Of course we are. But notice that the call to love does not come without a call to action as seen in the final portion of the expert’s response. We are to, “Love our neighbor as ourselves.” Jesus seems pleased with the response that has been given as he affirms to the man, “You have answered correctly . . . Do this and you will live.” (v. 28) It is interesting that Jesus does not say, “Continue to do as you have done and you will continue to live.” Jesus command seemingly instructs the man, and in turn us, to do something that has not been done. That is, Jesus seems to be telling this man to get to work and then he will begin living.

In all that we have come to know and in all that we ourselves are comfortable with in our daily routines, we have not yet begun to experience what life really has to offer. Without the ability to love our neighbors, we are incapable of truly knowing and understanding the love that God has for each of us. If we are to truly begin to live, then we are to love those, all those, we encounter. Jesus has made it quite clear that every person is our neighbor. And the Bible, likewise, makes clear our responsibility to our neighbor: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is an Old Testament teaching from believe it or not Leviticus 19. Leviticus is the same book that many use to condemn homosexuals and here we have in the same writings of the same author a command to love your neighbor!

In our reading today we discover that maybe the concept of *neighbor* is not as clear as we’d like it to be or maybe there becomes a shocking realization that needs to be clarified. The same is probably true for many of us. “Who is my neighbor?” asks the expert. The Bible tells us that he needed not clarification, but rather needed to justify himself. How often do we find ourselves in a situation where we know what the right thing to do is, but we fail to do so because of external pressures. We act in accordance to our cultural teachings and our

prejudices rather than from the perspective of God's call to radically include and love. Who then is our neighbor?

In short, everyone we encounter is our neighbor. The person beside you in the pew today, the family that lives next door, the person who occupies the desk or cubicle next to yours at the office, the lady in front of you in the checkout lane at Wal-Mart and yes even the person who condemns your relationship and makes hasty judgment against you based on their own cultural prejudices. But Jesus has more to say about it than just that. He calls us to serve those who are in need. So for us, love becomes more than just tolerance, forgiveness and the showing of grace. It becomes a call to action to help those who are seeking hope in a time of hopelessness; justice in a world full of injustice and peace in their time of war. The old saying, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone," is an alarming call to awareness that we are all sinners and that judgment is not ours to inflict, but how much more then are we to become aware that just as we are all sinners, we too are all in need. Each of us are seeking something more than what this world offers and many are either unaware that they are seeking or are simply unable to verbalize what it is that they seek.

Helping a neighbor in need is more than just tending to the physical needs of those we encounter, though this a great and wonderful call that we each have on our lives. We are also called to tend to the spiritual and emotional needs of those around us. To love our neighbors is to tend to the needs of those we encounter; emotional, spiritual and physical as we are able and directed by God. We should not seek to take on the burdens and concerns of the entire population, but rather we are to be sensitive to the needs of those that God places in our lives and we are to consider our role in assisting with these needs through prayerful consideration. Nothing we do of our own will ever bring glory to God and will do nothing to bring the kingdom of God into this world unless we act as we are lead by the Holy Spirit.

The Priest and the Levite in our reading were too busy to seek God's direction is assisting this man who had been beaten, robbed and left to die along the side of the road. Their view of who their neighbor is was certainly limited and skewed. And then there comes along a Samaritan, the most loathed of all the Jews who

sacrifices his time, his energy and his own plans for the day to help out someone in need; devoid of any concern of how this would benefit him, but full of concern only for helping the one in need.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan tells us that the man in need had been beaten and robbed by thieves he encountered on his journey. Isn't it true that there are at least two others who have found themselves beaten and robbed in this parable? They are not beaten and robbed by some outside force, but they are beaten and robbed by themselves. In failing to assist this man in need, the Priest and the Levite have robbed themselves of an opportunity to revel in the Joy that serving others provides us as children of the Living God. Maybe that is the problem to begin with. In all their understanding of God and the teachings they have come to know from the Talmud, they have failed to find meaning in Leviticus 19, "Love your neighbor as yourself." It is certain that the Priest and the Levite certainly had a love for themselves; they were too busy and full of themselves to tend to the needs of this man lying on the side of the road. But to place their own needs aside and to place the needs of this one individual ahead of their own was a teaching that clearly they had not come to understand.

Is loving our neighbor something we can do easily and effortlessly; free from the attachment of social stigma and prejudice? Probably not. Those who care for the marginalized of society often become subject to potential marginalization themselves. Where is God in all of this? Well, "Jesus knew all about stigma. He never hesitated to move among the oppressed people of his day, including the most despised social outcasts. He went about his ministry without worrying about the [slander] upon his character, his motives or his righteousness." (Scanzoni and Mollenkott, *Is The Homosexual My Neighbor*, p. 154)

Who is our neighbor? Is the homeless man on Broad Street sleeping on a park bench our neighbor? Is the Hispanic cashier at the local Wal-Mart our neighbor? Is the teenage boy with tight pants and purple hair our neighbor? What about the lady at work who never has anything nice to say about anything or anyone. Is she our neighbor? What about Reverend Fred Phelps in all of his attempts to spread hatred and demise in an otherwise peaceful nation. Is he our neighbor? What about the gay, the lesbian, the bisexual or transgendered; are they are neighbor? Of course they are and how we treat our neighbors says much about who we are and our

relationship with our God. 1 John 4: 20 – 21 has this to say about us and our willingness to take seriously Jesus' command to "love our neighbor as our self."

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (New Revised Standard Version)

God in God's mercy and compassion has not simply called us into being; into an existence void of responsibility and action. God has called us to entrust ourselves to our Creator and to one another. The Samaritan in the parable grasped this and so becomes for us a figure of Christ, an example of how each of us should live our lives. If we are to ever answer the question, "What would Jesus do?" we must pay close attention to the teachings Christ provides us and we are to learn from them. The challenge before each of us is simple, the challenge is whether or not we can accept that nothing good in us is ours apart from the grace of God and the trust of our neighbors. Amen!