

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's gospel reading includes the famous *Good Samaritan* parable, perhaps the most beloved of all that Jesus told. Its overall meaning is not really in dispute, but parables are notoriously complicated and are frequently misinterpreted out of a lack of familiarity with the literary genre, so even this one bears some scrutiny. This is also true, in part, because the more we hear a particular passage, the more this tends to force us into narrow views of stories which are meant to open up possibilities rather than to restrict them.

One of the complications here is that this parable is followed in the text by the story of Mary and Martha. Both concern what is expected of us in our activities in the world.

However, whereas the lawyer who questioned Jesus is told to "go and do likewise (or as the Samaritan had done)," Mary is praised for *not* going and doing. The Samaritan then shows us about loving our neighbor, whereas Mary shows us how to love the Lord. And both things are vital. They simply require some clarification.

Given Luke's view of "lawyers" from previous uses of the term, we can surmise that readers or hearers of this passage would already have been a bit suspicious of the questioner's motivations and reputation. And we are told he has come to "test" Jesus which suggests an intention to trap him or show him to be something less than he claims.

When Jesus asks the questioner how he understands the law as it informs us about our obligations, he answers with the daily-repeated *shema* from Deuteronomy about loving the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind (the latter verb added to the list to cover "understanding" the law). But he joins it with a commandment from Leviticus about loving our neighbor as ourself. We believe that prior to the time of Jesus, the two commandments were not linked so that this was an innovation. But the real issue here is that the questioner re-introduces the notion of distinctions among kinds of friends and neighbors which Jesus had eliminated in his Sermon on the Plain. By the end of the parable, Jesus has answered the question through a negation of the question's premise, because the parable teaches us that neighbor love knows no boundaries.

Although for us the phrase "good Samaritan" is universally understood, for a first century Jew, it would have been an oxymoron. This is because someone from Samaria would have been viewed as an enemy of Israel. "During an ancient Israeli war, most of the Jews living up north in Samaria were killed or taken into exile. However, a few Jews, who were so unimportant that nobody wanted them, were left in Samaria. Since that time, these Jews had intermarried with other races. They were considered 'half-breeds' by the 'true' Jews. They had perverted the race. They had also perverted the religion. They looked to Mt. Gerizim as the place to worship God, not Jerusalem. They interpreted the Torah

differently than the southern Jews. The animosity between the Jews and Samaritans was so great that some Jews would go miles out of their way to avoid walking on Samaritan territory.”

Thus, one could argue that we are not to identify with the Samaritan but rather with the man in the ditch. A Jew would be unable to identify with a Samaritan, finding such an experience so distasteful as to be impossible to accomplish. According to this alternative interpretation of the parable, the lesson may be that *“to enter the kingdom, one must get into the ditch and be served by one’s mortal enemy.”*

Here’s a further note of explanation of this idea: *A Jew who was excessively proud of his blood line and a chauvinist about his tradition would not permit a Samaritan to touch him, much less minister to him. In going from Galilee to Judea, he would cross and re-cross the Jordan to avoid going through Samaria. The parable therefore forces upon its hearers the question: who among you will permit himself or herself to be served by a Samaritan?...all who are truly victims, truly disinherited, have no choice but to give themselves up to mercy. The despised half-breed has become the instrument of grace: as listeners, the Jews choke on the irony.”*

Thus, one could argue that *we are the ones in the ditch in the parable, and the Samaritan represents God --- God who is both enemy and helper.* And certainly, that is a way of expanding the notion of God into a whole new level of meaning. And such a view suggests that *“the parable reveals a need among the Jewish hearers to be ‘healed’ of their prejudice against Samaritans.”*

What we expect of Jesus is that he will say to those listening, “you asked who your neighbor is, and now I’m telling you your neighbor is that anonymous man in the ditch.” But that is not what he says. Essentially he argues that figuring out the answer to the question (who is your neighbor) is “less important than making sure that you yourself act as a neighbor to everyone you meet.” The lawyer asked “who is my neighbor?” Jesus replies: “Nevermind that: **are you** a neighbor?”

I mention these things because we have a tendency to view parables as having a simple and obvious point when the reality is that they are subtle and complex and involve more the raising of questions than the provision of clear answers.

However, if we take as our guide what we know of how audiences in antiquity would have viewed the parable, we find that they would almost certainly have seen that the story was not about the man in the ditch or the brigands who landed him there. It is about the *Samaritan* and his benevolent assistance to one who had experienced misfortune. But the point of this is a bit more complex, because Luke’s intent here seems to be to make a Christological claim --- that is, a claim about the identity of Jesus as being not only the Son of God but having equality with God, thus being at least partly divine as well as human.

So, the Good Samaritan, when he shows compassion on the man in the ditch, is functioning figuratively as God's agent. We know from his *habit of restricting examples of compassion to those involving God* that this was his purpose. What is particularly interesting about this is that it was the early church which most consistently held to this interpretation of the parable. For example, Origen, a theologian in the 2ND and 3rd centuries preached a sermon on the parable in which he made just that argument. The modern resistance to this view of the parable must come about through hesitation to compare God with the hated Samaritans. In fact, however, depicting God as a compassionate Samaritan works very well with Luke's famous reversal pattern: *the world is turned upside-down when God is invoked ---- the mighty are brought low and the lowly are raised up.*

Before I confuse you further, however, let me try to give you a one-line explanation of the meaning of The Good Samaritan parable as most scholars today understand it: **love does not allow limits on the definition of neighbor.** That's the basic idea.

But here is some additional clarification. We should not even raise the question of who our neighbors are. No thought is allowed that *any* human being cannot be a neighbor. Compassion, mercy, and love are key factors in living for God. When we find these qualities associated with people we have never before considered worthy of our attention, the fact that these particular people exhibit those attitudes should be convincing proof of the value of the parable's message even if the reversal is hard for us to accept.

And it is God's intention that we put this into action and not simply reflect upon it. Christianity is a relational religion. It is practiced in community. We do not relate to God on our own. Our relationship with God is expressed through our relationships with the people around us, and it is God who enables those relationships.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

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