

HOMILY ORDINARY SUNDAY 15 C
“The Great Command and the Good Samaritan”
(Dt 30:10-14; Psalm 69 or 19; Col 1:15-20; Lk 10:25-37)

A mother sent her little girl to the store with strict orders to come straight back. When she was late returning, a worried mother asked her why. The girl responded that she had stopped to help her friend fix a broken doll. When the mother asked how she could fix a broken doll, she replied that she just stayed and helped her to cry.

Are you trying to get to heaven?

Be a Good Samaritan – love all those who are in need, and heaven will be yours.

There is a gentle progression in the readings today. In the first reading, Moses, the great Lawgiver, encourages the people of God to keep the Law. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that Jesus is the new Law, that he is the visible form of the invisible God, and that in Jesus God has loved us and reconciled us to himself.

In the gospel, we see Jesus demonstrating the Law in action. The lawyer knows the Law, but is caught in the all too common human effort to lower the demands of the Law to suit the narrow biases of those who profess to be keeping the Law. His question, “Who is my neighbor” is a tricky question meant to trip Jesus up or at least to justify his narrow concept of the Law. So Jesus, the master story teller, answers his question about who is our neighbor with the story of a Good Samaritan that leads to the more important question: “Who in the story was a neighbor to the man in need?”

The question “who is my neighbour?” limits love; the question “who is being neighbourly?” expands it to all regardless of race or creed. For Jesus, the real question is not “Who is my neighbour?”, but how does one prove one’s self a true neighbour to others. The point is that we must be a neighbour to all without distinction, like the Samaritan, and our help must be practical.

Let us explore the story more deeply. The road to Jericho dropped 3,600 feet in 20 miles and was notorious for bandits. The priest set ceremonial requirements above charity; the Levite put safety first. A Samaritan was considered a heretic and a breaker of the ceremonial law. At their worst, the Jews had a narrow definition of neighbour which meant fellow Jews. That smug definition justified them not helping a gentile woman in childbirth since that was to bring another gentile into the world. They actually used the Law to excuse themselves from loving another human being! The contrast here is between the group in Israel most bound to the law of love, and the heretical stranger from whom only hatred was expected.

In terms of characters and story-telling, the expected sequence in the story would be a priest, a Levite, then of course an Israelite. By making a Samaritan the hero, however, Jesus challenged the long-standing enmity between Jews and Samaritans, who were

regarded as an unclean people, the result of mixed marriages with Assyrian people from various regions following the fall of the northern kingdom. By depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story, Jesus demolished all boundary expectations. Social position, race, religion or region – all count for nothing.

Jesus compares the selfishness of the ministers of God with the compassion of the hated Samaritan so that they could glimpse the unlimited nature of the duty of love. The one who possesses the secret of eternal life is the stranger who does not have the need for security (lawyer) or status and dignity (priest). His love was spontaneous and did not refer to a law.

Anyone who has compassion and stops to help is a neighbour. Jesus invalidates all stereotypes. Community can no longer be defined or limited by such terms. Jesus has turned the issue from the boundaries of required neighbourliness to the essential nature of neighbourliness. The duty of neighbourliness is an expression of love of God and love of others, and those who show mercy show that they belong among the heirs of the kingdom. The duty of neighbourliness transcends any calculation or rewards.

Jesus' parable shatters the stereotypes of social boundaries and class division and renders void any system of religious entitlement. Neighbours do not recognize any social class. Eternal life – the life of the age to come – is that quality of life characterized by showing mercy for those in need, regardless of their race, religion or region, and with no thought of reward. Mercy sees only need and responds with compassion.

To love God with all one's heart and one's neighbour as one's self, meant then and now that one must often reject society's rules in favour of the codes of the kingdom – a society without distinctions and boundaries between its members. The rules of that society are just two – to love God and one's neighbour – but these rules are so radically different from those of the society in which we live that living them invariably calls us to disregard all else, break the rules, and follow Jesus' example.

There is strong symbolism in this story: We are the wounded strangers; Jesus is the Good Samaritan. The Spirit is the oil; the wine the blood of Jesus, the inn the Church; and it is really Jesus who will come again. Jesus is hidden in the stranger, and found in the hated Samaritan. In the end, we are the receivers of the injunction: Go and do likewise.

An example of a modern day Good Samaritan would have to be Mother Theresa of Calcutta, whose ministry involves picking up the dying, regardless of their religion or race, untouchable or not, to give them a death with dignity. Her famous saying to us is this: "What you would want to do for Jesus, whom you cannot see, do for the person in need next to you, whom you can see, and you will be doing it to Jesus."

The Eucharist that we celebrate today makes God's love in Jesus present to us, to transform us into his Body, his people, building His Kingdom here on earth through love for all in need.

So in the end, we don't have to worry about getting to heaven, or possessing eternal life. We just have to be about caring for all those in need right around us, and heaven will be ours.

A CHINESE PROVERB

If you want to be happy for an hour – take a nap

If you want to be happy for a day – go fishing.

If you want to be happy for a year - inherit a fortune.

If you want to be happy for life – help someone else.