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Church of St. Thomas More
65 East 89th Street, NYC
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15th Sunday of Year C Luke 10:25-37

Recently I heard it said that since the onset of Covid, as a nation, as a society, we have become more inward-looking, more focused on our own needs and the needs of those closest to us. Now, with the possible approach of a 6th Wave of the virus, fueled by the strongest subvariant to date, that tendency may increase all the more. It is good, then, that this parable of the Good Samaritan, which in the cycle of readings is given for our reflection every three years, should occur precisely now. We need to be reminded who is our neighbor, and what are our obligations to him or her.

The scholar is asking Jesus to define who precisely is his neighbor, and who is not. He may genuinely want to do the right thing in God's sight, but at the same time he wants to put limits on whom he has an obligation to help, and those whom he can ignore. He wants to know the minimum requirement of being a faithful Jew, so that he can be eligible for eternal life. Sound familiar? Today, it would be like a motorist asking a police officer how many miles can I go over the speed limit before I get a ticket. Jesus will show that focusing on limits—on how much I can get away with, on how little I have to do—is the wrong way to approach the matter of living a life of faith and love.

Let's begin to look at the story. We are familiar with the one liner, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" The question for us is 'why did the priest and the Levite, an assistant priest, cross the road?' Why did they go to the opposite side to distance themselves from the wounded man? The priest happens to be going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. By chance he happens to see this man who appears to be "half-dead" lying by the roadside. Remember what John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans." Stuff happens. What am I going to do about it? Well the priest does nothing about it except cross to the other side of the road because he doesn't want to touch the man. The man could be still alive, or he could be dead. The priest can't tell, so he's not taking any chances. Why? In the Jewish tradition a dead body was considered to be unclean, impure, defiled. So, for the priest whose job it was to handle things that were sacred, things dedicated to God, if the man were dead, he would make himself unclean, impure, defiled by touching a corpse. He would then not be able to perform his duties involved in offering sacrifices in the Temple for seven days. Likewise with the Levite. Here we see it was their attitude to religion that prevented them from coming to the aid of the wounded man.

Then the Samaritan comes along. Remember that, because of religious and ethnic differences, the Jews and the Samaritans had no use for each other. For the Jews of that era the idea of a “good” Samaritan was an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. So deep was their hatred that one might say their attitude was the only “good” Samaritan was a dead Samaritan. In any case the Samaritan sees the man, stripped and half-dead. If he is naked there are no indications from his clothing about his wealth, his status, his background, his ethnicity. All the Samaritan sees before him is a fellow human being who needs his help. The Gospel says of the Samaritan, ‘He was moved with compassion at the sight.’ That is a rather weak translation. More literally it is something like, ‘his entrails were pulled out.’ For the Samaritan what he sees is gut-wrenching. A much better translation would be, “His heart went out to the man.” There is a connection, a bond of empathy, between the Samaritan and the man that is direct and immediate. The parable goes on to say that ‘he approached the victim,’ i.e., he wasn’t afraid or reluctant to touch him, and he poured oil and wine over his wounds.’ Oil and wine are used here as a disinfectant. Oil and wine were also used by the priests and levites in performing their sacrificial duties in the Temple. So, the priest and Levite might well have been carrying some wine and oil with them, but to their way of thinking these items should be dedicated for God’s service, not for the man half-dead lying by the road.

Let me tell a story that helps to illustrate how the demands imposed by our shared humanity trump all lesser considerations about who does or does not deserve our charity, especially those considerations rooted in some sort of religious prejudice dictating that it would be inappropriate, even wrong, to help certain kinds of people, because of their religion, sexual orientation, lifestyle, whatever—again, a case where religion would get in the way of showing understanding and compassion. Before coming here I was pastor of St. Peter’s Church in lower Manhattan, which is just around the corner from the World Trade Center. I happened to be there during the tragic events of 9/11. A week after a man came to me and said he wanted to apologize for what he did the morning of 9/11. He said that he was a doctor and walking down the street headed for a meeting nearby, when he heard the sound of the plane crashing into the Tower. He stood standing in front of the church looking at the building ablaze. Several minutes later police officers were bringing people, severely wounded and bleeding from the shattered glass, to the steps of the church, until ambulance would arrive to transport them to hospitals. He was a doctor, but he had no medical supplies with him. What could he do to help these wounded people so that they would not bleed to death? He went into the church and saw the linens on the altar, linens reserved for God’s service. He took the altar linens and ripped them up to make tourniquets, so that the wounded would not bleed out. The doctor came back to

apologize because he had a sense that the linens dedicated to a sacred use should not be used for a profane purpose. But he knew that to save the lives of those wounded people was what mattered most. He saw who was his neighbor and he did what he could to help. He ended by saying that he felt guilty because he wasn't Catholic. He was a Jew. Obviously he did the right thing.

Jesus ends the conversations by asking the scholar, "Which of these three was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" to which the scholar would appear to gag on the word 'Samaritan,' so he can only say, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus had said in another context, quoting the prophet Isaiah, "It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice." Finally, the man gets it right. In so many words, it is mercy, simple human kindness, compassion for one's fellow human being, which come before everything else, even the exercise of specifically religious duties and obligations. Jesus never answers the scholar's question, 'Who precisely is my neighbor?' Instead Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." Jesus' parable does not limit who is my neighbor; it creates the neighbor. It expands the definition of neighbor to any kind of person who is in need and whom I am in a position to help.

All the parables of Jesus have one aim in common—they invite the listener to situate, to locate herself or himself in the story. They ask whom do I most resemble in the story? And, secondly what am I going to do about it, what am I going to do now? Am I going to take the path that Jesus is pointing toward? In this case the question is not "Who is my neighbor," but, "To whom am I a neighbor?" And more importantly, "How neighborly am I?" Am I so focused on my own needs that I am oblivious to the needs of those around me? Am I willing to extend myself with generosity and compassion? That is the question that the risen Jesus, present among us, is asking each of us today?