

A few years ago I heard a story about a guy—he was either a priest or a seminarian—who was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He was in Israel somewhere and had purchased a bunch of things in a store, so many things that he needed help carrying them until he got back with his group. A kind little old Jewish woman offered to help him. He thanked her and—thinking it was a compliment—referred to her as his “good samaritan.” That did not go over very well. She told him in no uncertain terms that she was not a Samaritan and that she had never been so insulted in her life. Even today, there is still enmity between Jew and Samaritan, but it probably pales in comparison to the way it was at the time of today's gospel. I mention it in order to give us a glimpse of how radical and shocking the parable we just heard would have been the first time Jesus told it. A Samaritan hearing this parable would probably have been equally as shocked because enmity goes both ways, even though it shouldn't. The person Jesus held up as a model of merciful behavior for everyone to follow was a despised and hated samaritan yet this he was the only person who treated the robbers' victim—who was likely the samirian's own enemy—with kindness and mercy; he was the only one who put into practice the law of love which God had inscribed upon his heart.

The merciful samaritan, the one who was a true neighbor to the robbers' victim, was a challenge to the scholar of the law who had asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life. He challenges us as well. His identity isn't the challenge—we call the Samaritan “good.” His actions are what challenges us. The robber's victim was presumably a Jew, an enemy of the Samaritan, yet the Samaritan treated him as his neighbor in accordance with the teaching of Moses from Leviticus (19:18) to love your neighbor as yourself. The Samaritan went to great lengths to show love and mercy to this enemy: he tended his wounds, placed him on his own animal and carried him to an inn where he continued to look after him. He left money with the innkeeper to continue caring for him and promised to pay more money when he returned if it was needed.

We live in a very divided world, even within the church. How do we treat those we disagree with—whom we often call “enemies”? We cannot even honestly call them our enemies because we only really have one enemy and that is Satan. Yet, we allow our political allegiances, race, culture, language, sports teams, liturgical preferences, sexuality, gender, and many other things both serious and trivial to divide us and we treat each other as enemies—when only Satan should be treated as an enemy. This doesn't mean we allow others to go on hurting us.

That would not be just. But just because someone treats us as their enemy, it doesn't give us the right to treat them as ours.

Concretely, what can we do? We can always strive to be civil to each other, always keeping in mind that that other person is created in the image and likeness of God and is a beloved child of God. We can pray for that person or group of people that God will bless them according to His will—according to HIS will, not our will. Simple acts of kindness can also go a long way towards reconciliation. We cannot control how that other person is going to receive that act of kindness...so what? At least we have done our part and if it seems to go unrecognized or unappreciated, it can become an opportunity for us to pick up part of Jesus' cross and help him carry it.

Jesus told this parable to challenge the religious authorities of the time with regard to how they were living out God's law of love. He intends for it to challenge us as well. The scripture doesn't say the Samaritan was good. We call him that. If we call the Samaritan "good," should we not try to follow his example?