

15TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (C)

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Luke 10:25-37. In this text we read the famous story of the Good Samaritan. Because most of us are very familiar with this passage we may actually miss some of the subtle teachings Jesus wants to communicate. Let's study the passage in depth to see what insights can be offered for our discipleship.

The passage begins with a Lawyer asking Jesus what must be done to inherit eternal life. Although the Lawyer already knows the answer, the question is posed in an effort to test Jesus. The malicious questions of the Lawyer demonstrate a serious dichotomy in his faith life: although he may know the correct answer (love God and neighbor), he is not acting on that knowledge as is demonstrated by his repeated attempts to test Jesus. In response to the Lawyer's actions, Jesus commands him to start acting on his knowledge of the Law. Certainly the study of the Law was important, but what good is it to know the right answer but not live it? A person who knows the right thing to do and doesn't do it is more culpable than the person who lacks knowledge of right and wrong. For disciples, it is important to have an integrated faith that seeks to live out in concrete deeds what we know to be true and revealed by God. If we fail to integrate our faith into daily action then we are like the Lawyer in this story who may have known the way to eternal life but wasn't following it. Christian love is not a mere sentiment but rather a movement toward action to do the good for another person that Jesus wants. To love God with all our heart, soul, might and mind is to give the Lord a complete sovereign claim on every aspect of our lives. If any part of ourselves is held back from the Lord then we have not fulfilled the commandment to love.

- *What part of people's lives can they be tempted to keep from God and why?*
- *What happens when a person loves God with only a part of their being?*
- *When have you seen a Christian accumulate knowledge of faith without living it?*

The Lawyer wanted to limit the scope of his duty to love and so he asks Jesus to define for him who is a neighbor. Some people thought that a person's neighbor was limited to someone who was a member of their family, friends, community, or nation. The Lawyer wanted Jesus to draw the boundaries of who was his neighbor because that would determine whom he had to love. Of course, the answer would also determine whom he didn't have to love. It can be easy for us to follow the example of the Lawyer and to seek ways in which we limit our responsibility to care for others as well.

- *How do we tend to limit our responsibility for others today?*
- *Who are the groups who "don't deserve our love" in our society?*

- *If you were to identify the hierarchy of groups in your life that is family, relatives, friends, business associates based on their "right" to your love, what would be the relative order?*
- *Who is someone you think exemplifies love without limitation and what does it look like?*

We oftentimes think the parable of the Good Samaritan is just a teaching about being kind to people but it's much more than that. You see, the whole parable is told from the perspective of the man who is half-dead on the road. We are meant to see ourselves as that person and to see the parable unfold through his eyes. Two people passed by him and both of them had reasons why they should have stopped and helped but didn't. Instead, they focused on their excuses for not helping. The priest and Levite might become ritually "unclean" if they touched a half-dead man, and it was dangerous to wait around in that region longer than necessary. The wounded man's hopes were dashed as each of these two religious figures left him to die. Then, the Samaritan comes by—the one person who had every reason not to stop but the one person who is moved by compassion to help the man. The injured man did not care that a Samaritan helped him. He was grateful for anyone who would come to his aid. Whoever helped the injured man was a "neighbor" to him. If the injured man would allow the Samaritan to be a neighbor to him, then the injured man had to consider the Samaritan his neighbor and love him in return. This perspective turns our reasoning upside down because it asks us to see ourselves in a position of dire vulnerability and need. In such a position, we have to ask ourselves the question, "Who would you allow to help you if you were half-dead on the roadside?" Then that person is our neighbor, and we have an obligation to help them just as we would accept help from them. The very question of the Lawyer has been reversed. Rather than asking, "Who is my neighbor?"; the Lawyer should have been asking, "How can I be a neighbor to those in need?" Rather than patting ourselves on the back every time we do a good deed for someone we love and saying, "I helped someone"; we need to also ask, "Who did I not help?"

- *How does this understanding of the parable broaden your perspective of who is your neighbor?*
- *Who have you been a neighbor to this past week? Who have you failed as a neighbor?*
- *Who are the Samaritans in our world?*
- *How can people today use religious principles as an excuse for not helping someone in need?*

Jesus ends by saying to the Lawyer, "Go and do likewise." This is almost the exact same commandment Jesus gave the lawyer at the beginning of this passage. Our Lord is trying to help the lawyer, and us, understand that compassion must translate itself

into self-giving that takes risks for the good of others. The compassion of the Samaritan moved him to delay his journey in a perilous part of the wilderness solely for the sake of helping another human being. The compassion of the Samaritan also led him to use his own resources to pay for the man's care and even to provide future generosity based on his need. That kind of compassion helps others even when sacrifice is involved. Lastly, the Samaritan made no claim on the wounded man in exchange for his kindness but simply moved on with his life and allowed the wounded man to move on with his life. That is true detachment that does not need to be thanked, recognized, or praised for doing good for someone. This entire passage began with the Lawyer asking a very self-centered and self-serving question about his own salvation but the passage ends with the story of the Samaritan who acts with complete selflessness. If the Lawyer shows mercy only for the sake of gaining heavenly reward then he will not be imitating the selfless generosity of the Samaritan. Rather, only when the Lawyer knows his own need for mercy and out of that awareness shows mercy to others can he then trust in God's mercy for eternal life. Eternal life is not for sale and it is not a reward for doing good. Eternal life is a trusting relationship in a good and merciful God who asks us to share that goodness and mercy with others even as we seek it from Him. Mother Teresa once said, "We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop."

- *When have you risked something to help another person?*
- *What is the most profound compassion you have experienced?*
- *What situation in your life right now is calling you to show the compassion of the Good Samaritan for someone?*
- *How do you know when you have enough knowledge and it is time to do something?*