

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More
65 East 89th Street, NYC **July 14, 2019**
15th Sunday of Year C **Luke 10:25-37**

We are familiar with the riddle/joke, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" The more important question for us in light of the parable in today's gospel is "why did the priest and the levite, the assistant priest, cross the road?" Why did they cross the road in order to avoid any physical contact with the man beaten by robbers? The parable begins, the priest happened to be going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. So by chance he happens to see this man who appeared to be half-dead lying by the road. Remember what John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans." Stuff happens. What are we going to do about it? Well the priest and the assistant priest do nothing except cross to the other side of the road because neither wants to have any contact with the injured man. Why? Because of their attitude to religion; because of what they believed God was asking of them. The priest and the levite can't tell if the man is dead or alive. But in the Jewish tradition a dead body was considered to be unclean, impure, defiled. So, for the priest and levite, whose job it was to handle things that were sacred, things dedicated to God, they would make themselves unclean, impure, defiled by touching a dead body. So, to be safe, they keep on walking. Again, the point of the parable is not that they were in too much of a hurry to stop, or that they were indifferent to the man's plight, it was that their attitude to their religious tradition got in the way of helping someone in obvious distress.

The priest and levite here represent all those who cannot recognize their "neighbor" in individuals whom they consider unworthy of their concern, because there is something about "those people"--in their judgment--that makes "those people," people who are not like us, just not right. This attitude creates an "us against them" world. Those who consider themselves superior find their moral worth, their goodness, their value, by defining themselves in opposition to those whom they look down upon. They tell themselves, "I am not like them." "They are not as good as me." Almost any mark of difference—race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation—can provide the rationalization for justifying one's alleged superiority, thereby acquitting one of any kind of respect, care or attention to their needs.

Then the Samaritan comes along. Remember that, because of religious and ethnic differences, the Jews and the Samaritans had no use for each other. In any case the Samaritan sees the man, stripped and half-dead. The fact that the man is naked is significant, because it means that there are no indications from his clothing

about his wealth, his status, his ethnicity—nothing about who he is or where he comes from. All the Samaritan sees is a fellow human being in need of 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 were used to cleanse wounds, but they were also used by the priests in the religious ceremonies of the Temple. So, the priest and levite might well have been carrying some wine and oil with them, but again, to their way of thinking, these items should be dedicated for God’s service, not for the man half-dead lying by the road.

Jesus concludes 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.” Interestingly Jesus never answered the scholar’s question, ‘Who precisely is my neighbor?’ Instead Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” Jesus’ parable did not define who is our neighbor. The danger is trying to define one’s neighbor in advance is that we may end up doing it too narrowly. We include some and we exclude others, again, creating an “us against them” world. Ever since Jesus gave us that parable, the question is not ‘who is my neighbor’ but ‘will I be a neighbor?’ Will I be a neighbor to the person in need who happens to cross my path, and for whom I am in a position to offer some help? Will I stop or will I look the other way?

Let me give two examples—one wherein religion can get in the way of recognizing someone as a “neighbor,” and one wherein religion did not. Remember the case of the baker who refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple because they objected to same-sex marriage on religious grounds. The case went to the Supreme Court that upheld their right to the free exercise of the baker’s religious convictions. But, sometimes what one has the right to do may be less important than what one ought to do. So, another way, a better way, a way of looking at the situation in light of today’s gospel is that the baker could have made the cake, while not endorsing same-sex marriage, but respecting the right of the couple to exercise their conscience in their decision to marry. It is simply to respect the dignity of another human being, even one with whom one may disagree.

Let me tell a story that helps to illustrate how the demands imposed by our shared humanity trumps everything about our judgments of people, about what we

consider holy and unholy, about what is appropriate or inappropriate. 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. AS you may know, I happened to be there during the tragic events of 9/11. A week after that day a man came to me and said he wanted to apologize for what he did the morning of 9/11. I asked him to explain what he was talking about. He said that he was a doctor and walking down the street headed for a meeting in one of the office buildings, 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 them off 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, but Jewish.

Let us pray that we can put aside any barriers created by differences of religion, race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, social status or sexual orientation, because our common humanity trumps everything. That's what the Samaritan in today's parable saw. Let us pray we can be neighbors to each other, more importantly that we can see ourselves as brothers and sisters, children of the One God whom we call our Father.