

Who is My Neighbor?

My brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today's gospel presents us with the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a parable that is premised upon the love of God and love of neighbor. When a lawyer asks how he might inherit eternal life, Jesus leads him not only to answer his own question but also to a deeper understanding that eternal life is rooted in love of God and love of neighbor.

Notice the question by the lawyer: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He desires to inherit a life of beholding the face of God forever. A life of peace, absolute tranquility and boundless joy. A life with the angels and saints. A life in heaven. Jesus reminds him that the road to such a life in God is loving with his entire being. Such a road of love can be bumpy sometimes.

Jesus illustrates this point with the story of a man robbed, beaten and left for dead. In this situation, the man's neighbor would be anyone willing to help him. That he was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho suggests that he might have been returning from a pilgrimage to the temple. It makes it even more ironic that he would be passed and ignored first by a Jewish priest and then by a Levite, both members of the Jewish clerical class. What is even more surprising is that the one who finally helps him is not a Judean layperson, as one might expect, but rather a Samaritan who not only tends to the man's wounds but also brings him to an inn and agrees to pay his expenses.

Remember that at the time, no Samaritan was good to a Jewish mind and vice versa. There was mutual hostility between Samaritans and Jews. Jews going from Galilee to Jerusalem would normally avoid Samaria, which was right between both places, go through a dangerous terrain and cross the Jordan river to get to their destination. It added a couple more days to their trip. They put themselves through such stress because, in the context of the time, love of neighbor applied only to someone who professed the same creed with you or was of the same tribe as you, and not to others.

But Jesus came to bring salvation to all people and so extended the commandment of love to include loving one's enemies. Through this parable, Jesus challenges the lawyer - and us - to imitate the Samaritan's example: "go and do likewise." Our Savior teaches us that we can only define the subject of love (ourselves), not the object. Just like within the context of relationship there are people whom we would particularly not want to share the same household with, but God put you together in the same family.

My dear friends, on our journey to heaven (eternal life), we will encounter neighbors, many of whom we may not have anything in common with but we are called to love. Loving can come in the form of praying for them, forgiving them, letting go of the past or even wishing them well in life. To love is to obey God and do his will even when it hurts.

May the Holy Spirit give us the grace and strength to do God's will. Amen.

*--Fr. Anthony Ahamefule
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