

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Say the name “Samaritan” and everyone immediately has an idea of what you are talking about. “Good Samaritan Hospital,” for example, wants to promote a particular image of how it’s going to care for the sick. Parishes that take up a “Samaritan collection” don’t have to do a lot of explaining when it comes to identifying the collection’s purpose.

And when we hear this Gospel passage we can quickly focus on the imagery of a foreigner caring for someone he doesn’t even know, and sparing no expense when doing so.

Let’s back up a minute, though, and remember that Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in the context of a conversation he is having with one of the scholars of the law.

If we focus on that conversation for a moment, then some other questions besides “And who is my neighbor?” come to the fore.

For one, the first question the scholar of the law asks is “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Do those things really go together? Doing and inheriting? Generally speaking, an inheritance is based on a birthright and a relationship rather than being something a person has earned.

So, the scholar of the law has already indicated that he’s not really looking at his life in the context of his relationship with God, but is concerned about “working the system,” and doing those things he has to do in order to compel God to admit him into heaven.

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

What goes along with that is the hidden motivation of not doing anything more than necessary. The bare minimum will suffice.

As his first attempt Jesus simply refers him to the law of Moses. For Jesus and the Jews of his day, the law, God's word, was spirit and life. It guided the chosen people into the blessedness God had in store of us.

Unfortunately, if you had a legal bent of mind, it would not take too long before you arrived at the point of simply cutting out anything that is not absolutely necessary. Why bother with it if it is not really going to contribute to your goal?

The scholar of the law has done this, but there remains for him that inkling that he might be missing something. In order to quieten his conscience he needs Jesus' affirmation.

Of course, Jesus doesn't work that way at all. For him, it's all about the relationship. And he sees relationship present even in situations that others would judge to be beyond the pale.

The priest and Levite in Jesus' story, for example, both see in the person lying bleeding on the side of the road a threat to their ritual purity. If they took the trouble to care for him, it would mean that they could not participate in the temple worship until they had ritually purified themselves.

What an inconvenience! Better to just leave him lying there for the sake of the ritual purity they needed to exercise their profession.

We do that. We rule ourselves out from this or that act of

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

charity because some other interest or value will be compromised.

Maybe we say to ourselves, “My time is too valuable to get involved in that.” Or “I don’t know enough or have enough to really do much good.” Or “What if it’s a trick and the person means to do me harm.” Or “Let his own take care of him. That’s what we do.”

Actually, the forms of self-justification are numberless. We have our favorites, to be sure, but will grasp for whatever works, so long as the end result is not having to get involved.

It’s good to remember, though, that no form of self-justification has an antidote for the pangs of conscience—that still, small voice which reminds us of who we are and whose we are.

The Samaritan traveler probably never worshiped in the temple—that was something the Jews did only from the time of King David—but he did know that following the law brought life and he put his faith in that.

That gave the freedom to act with compassion on behalf of one he recognized as a fellow traveler on the road, with whom he shared a bond of common humanity and common vulnerability.

In his understanding of the law fell well within the limits of what God calls us to do to reach out to him and attend to his needs with the resources he had available. It was simply understood. With no ifs, ands, buts, or conditions, but with the awareness that such actions strengthen the bond between one another but more importantly with God.