

One story, two settings

Both the Gospels Matthew and Luke contain this story about Jesus being questioned by the scholar of the Law as to which of the commandments is the greatest.

One of the things that came to mind to me as I reflected on the Gospel passage from this week is how the conversation continued in Luke's rendering of the story. Once Jesus gives his response the scholar's first question, the follow-up is, "And who is my neighbor?" And then we hear the parable of the good Samaritan.

That parable is not included in Matthew's gospel. And that might provide us with an opportunity to look around a bit to see how else the two greatest commandments of the law might be carried out.

In the story of the good Samaritan the focus is pretty clearly on seeing any person in need as neighbor and responding with compassion. But the focus of that story is also pretty clearly one-to-one.

The Samaritan finds the man beaten up and lying on the side of the road and takes him personally to the inn and cares for him and then provides for his further care by giving the innkeeper some money to cover expenses until he can get back. You could say

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that the good Samaritan offers us an excellent example of what it means to practice charity.

Does love of neighbor ever go beyond that?

The nation that cares

It seems to me that the first reading offers us a reflection on what love of God and love of neighbor means in a broader context. The setting is the moment when God gives the Law to the people of Israel. All the people, all together, are the recipients. And they all commit themselves to the covenant the Law embodies. God is saying to them as a people, “This is the kind of nation I expect you to be: Don’t be hypocrites. You know what it’s like to be refugees and aliens in a foreign country. You know how hard that is. So, I expect you to be kind to the refugees and aliens in your midst. Don’t make life hard for them or it will not go well with you.

He says, “You know that I saved you from the Egyptians, that I drew you out from the land of slavery, something you could never have done on your own in a million years. So, don’t be hypocrites by expecting those who don’t have the basic necessities of life to somehow pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. I expect you to be a nation in

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which the widow and the orphan, the poor in your midst, have what they need to survive with dignity.”

Caring and planning: Making sure justice reigns

Because the law is addressed to the entire nation it's safe to assume that the Israelites' response was going to have to be more systematic than simple one-to-one charity. It would have to find its way into the social institutions of the people of Israel. That brings it into the realm of justice and not just charity.

No one argues that to be Christian means that we have to work at being charitable. Even if we find that difficult, we know that's what we're called to do. But to work for justice—well, I've found that I can't assume that everyone buys into that project, even though it's a theme that runs through the entire Bible and has been emphasized time and time again by the Church's teaching.

One of the problems with working for justice is that there are a lot of different opinions about how to go about it. And discussions and debates about the means for achieving justice can get quite animated.

Where are the limits? Who sets them?

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A larger problem, perhaps, might be the very nature of justice, though. Justice can be so demanding! Whereas charity tends to involve individuals or small groups of people acting to meet the immediate needs of others, justice involves a more communal and even global awareness of problems and their potential long-term solutions.

Where the notion of charity calls to mind voluntary giving out of one's surplus—the extra coins in the Salvation Army kettle—the notion of justice suggests that there is an absolute obligation to share all the benefits of God's creation in such a way that everyone has what they need to live lives in keeping with their basic human dignity.

The God of justice is the God of mercy

Israel's concern for the care of the poor and the weak and the justice that is their due was not unique in the ancient world. Other nations made room for some form of justice, too. What is unique to Israel, though, is the immediate and dynamic role the God of Israel plays in determining what justice is and how it is accomplished.

By his own action on behalf of the people, God has set an example and raised the bar on the dealings that are also to characterize the people who claim

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to believe in and belong to God.

Our national blessing and our national responsibility

We are inclined to talk about our nation as being blessed. And it's true. God has blessed us with a great deal. But to the extent that we have been beneficiaries of God's many blessings, God also holds us responsible to make use of those blessings, both in our one-on-one encounters where charity must prevail, as well as systematically, in our social institutions and policies, where justice must prevail.

In God charity and justice meet

To be true to the name we call ourselves, Christians, we must be about both: charity and justice. Otherwise, it will not go well with us when we stand before the throne.