

July 15, 2007
Rev. Mark Forrester
7th Sunday after Pentecost(c)

Beyond the Secular Saint

Luke 10:25-37

Few of Jesus' parables have survived so well into our biblically illiterate times as has The Good Samaritan. A Google search the other day displayed all the creative ways the title "Good Samaritan" is now used in the naming of hospitals and in the conferring of civic awards.

To say that someone is a "Good Samaritan" has become shorthand for helping once a week at the downtown shelter; or going out of one's way during the busy Christmas season to collect gifts and food for the needy; or sacrificing five Saturdays in a row to work on a Habitat for Humanity project.

Don't get me wrong, the world is, indeed, a better place because individuals pour their time and resources into countless charitable concerns. It's just that the Good Samaritan of Jesus' story has been distorted, taken out of context and remade into some kind of secular saint who goes around blessing our good deeds (which usually consists of the favored fortunate doing good to those who are unattractive and less fortunate).

It also strikes me that the Good Samaritan has become the patron saint of do-goodism because, by and large, volunteerism and civic-mindedness is becoming increasingly rare. As a society, we no longer embrace service as a routine expression of citizenship required of all. As a matter of fact, criminal and civil courts sentence people to do "community service time," portraying service as a form of punishment more than a reward unto itself.

To say the least, this morning's gospel presents us with far more than a role model for good citizenship. The parable about the so-called Good Samaritan as told by Jesus is a story that is quite disturbing and full of irony.

Jesus tells the story as a way of answering the lawyer's question, "who is my neighbor?" It was a question designed to make Jesus look foolish, since he had just told the lawyer, in broad and very vague terms, to, *"love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all*

your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

The lawyer's follow up, "well, then, just who is my neighbor?," was certainly a legalistic question, but not an uncommon or unreasonable question at all. We define ourselves almost entirely by an ongoing process of inclusion and exclusion. For those of us who live in neighborhoods that are somewhat neighborly, we know who our neighbors are and who, by contrast, are not our neighbors. We organize through our neighborhood associations the Neighborhood Watch, which means that we look out for each other by noticing who is coming and going: are they neighbors or strangers, insiders or outsiders, "us" or "them"?

The original command from the book of Leviticus (19:17-18) specified that love of neighbor was really no more, and no less, than love of "your kin" or "any of your people." Jesus could have easily given the accepted rabbinical commentary on the subject and gone on his way. Instead, he talks about an anonymous person who, while on a seventeen-mile trip from Jericho to Jerusalem, is overtaken by thieves, is robed, beaten and left for dead.

When the priest and the Levite decide not to intervene, modern audiences have been encouraged to see them as the bad guys--as either too hardhearted and calloused, or too squeamish, to dirty their hands. Way too often Christian piety has vilified the Jewish authorities as a way of justifying anti-Semitism, as a way of saying that Judaism is inferior to the Christian faith. But the good Jewish folk in Jesus' day would not have condemned the priest or the Levite for their decision to leave the half dead man alone. In fact, religious figures were forbidden by the law to not even get close to a dead body, even when the corpse was that of a parent (Leviticus 21:10-11). The priest and the Levite of Jesus' story merely represent the traditional way clergy were expected to deal with a situation like this.

All religions seem to require their leaders to be set apart, set aside, set above or set beyond the normal circumstances of life. Too often ministers, priests, rabbis and omans become the designated surrogates through which the community symbolizes impossible standards of purity.

Almost twenty years ago I served a rural church that brought this lesson home to me in a very forceful way. The young adult Sunday School class invited me to accompany them on a beautiful fall retreat in Gatlinburg. They rented a large chalet that served as the base camp of activity throughout the day. Some hiked to Clingman's Dome, while others played golf, went shopping or simply rested on the large deck overlooking a beautiful vista. That evening we all regrouped for a cookout. Before long, bottles of beer and glasses of wine were being passed around. I had not been so bold as to bring my own, so when the president of the class offered me a Heineken I felt relieved for being included and accepted as a normal human being. When I returned to the office on Monday morning, I found out, much to my horror, that I had violated a taboo. Even though most of those young adults were not put off with the preacher enjoying libations with them, one woman was totally scandalized by the very sight and, after returning home on Sunday afternoon, took it upon herself to call every elderly member of that small congregation to break the sad news that their minister was sipping suds with some of the unruly men and, thus, was anything but a godly role model. Allowing myself to relax and be one with the people, I set off a firestorm. From that point on I found it much easier to sympathize with the priest and Levite in today's gospel lesson. They were simply minding their manners and keeping a safe distance from unwanted criticism.

To get to the heart of the parable, we have to look beyond these distortions of the secular saint and sacred straw man. What draws us closer to Jesus' teaching lies in the irony and boldness implied by the Samaritan being called a "good" Samaritan. Samaritans were regarded as unclean people, descendants of the mixed marriages that followed from the Assyrian resettlement of Hebrews from the fallen northern Kingdom. They were equivalent to individuals and groups in our country who fit the profile of the "enemy combatant." They would be under surveillance and constant suspicion. Because of their race and nationality, Samaritans were the ultimate outsiders. Few trusted or liked them. As a matter of fact, just prior to today's lesson Luke narrates the story of Jesus and his disciples being denied welcome in a Samaritan village. We are

told that James and John were so insulted that they wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume it! (Luke 9:52-54)

What Jesus is doing here is forcing the lawyer (and us?) to answer the question, “who is my neighbor?” with a more probing question, “who was the neighbor?” The radical truth of Jesus’ gospel often unfolds when he refuses to define God and neighbor as nouns, but describes them in poetic, evocative ways as verbs. We know God, and godliness in others, not because of who they are, what names we give to them, what traditions we identify them by, but by “doing” the things God would do--loving by doing: with totality of heart, mind, soul and strength. We can only know who our neighbors are by first being a neighbor.

Lastly, today’s parable invites us to identify with the victim because the victim is the only character who isn’t given a race, gender, class or religion. To visualize ourselves in dire straights, only to be rescued by a Samaritan, by the one person who offends us like nobody else, is sobering. Jesus taught, by word and deed, that God’s grace is not discriminating, and those who often mediate God’s healing and peace are the very ones who grate against our sensibilities.

We began today’s lesson by hearing the lawyer ask, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” An inheritance, of course, is a gift that we feel entitled to, a reward for having been a member of a family or clan that distributes its wealth according to blood line. The good news communicated in this story is that eternal life is not a special reward for the select few at the end of life. Eternal life, instead, is a divine quality of life given and received in the present moment, a moment characterized by the showing of mercy beyond the boundaries of “me, myself and mine.”

As we come to this Communion Table, let us recognize the Samaritan as Christ, our ultimate helper, who sees, has compassion and restores our beaten lives with the healing salve of his body and blood. Let us recognize in the Samaritan not a secular saint, but the divine Prophet who equips and commands us to “go and do likewise.” Amen.

