



In Joy and Hope

by

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Who is my neighbor?

There are countless answers to the many questions we ask each day in the course of our lives. It is so easy to forget the answers we give to the innocuous and even the important questions asked of us. Yet, what is often more important than the answer is the question. Some questions haunt us throughout our lives. Some questions remain with us until the day we die.

Throughout the Gospels, there are many questions. The questions often become the occasion for Jesus to present a challenge to his disciples, as well as to us. Last weekend in the Sunday liturgy, as a result of a question, Jesus told a parable that would contain a question that cries out for a response we cannot ignore - **Who is my neighbor?**

The parable of the Good Samaritan

The setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan is one which Jesus faced often. He was teaching the people, and a lawyer asked a question, "Teacher, what must I do to gain eternal life?"

Instead of answering directly, Jesus asks the lawyer what the law says. Like the good religious person of his time, the lawyer summarizes the teaching of the great commandment to love God with all of one's heart, soul and strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Jesus acknowledges the response and tells the lawyer to live accordingly. But the lawyer is not satisfied. He pushes the question and asks, **"Who is my neighbor?"**

This question becomes the setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan, that incredible story of love and compassion, intimacy and responsiveness, self-sacrifice and effective assistance.

A man is robbed and beaten. A Levite and priest see him and pass him by. But then a Samaritan comes along. A Samaritan is almost a nonperson as far as the Jewish community is concerned. Yet, it is the Samaritan that stops, invests himself and his resources in the situation, and shares the gift of compassion and love with the stranger.

The parable ends with a question when Jesus asks, "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" There is only one answer the lawyer can give, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus tells him, "Go and do likewise."

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Compassion and love

It is easy to moralize about the implications of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan becomes the motivating parable to prompt our generosity of our resources, time and energy on behalf of those in need. Yet, the challenge of the parable is more than a material response to the needs of others. The parable asks us to characterize our response with compassion and love.

Compassion is more than sympathy. Compassion asks us literally to stand in the shoes of those around us, to try to appreciate the pain, the difficulties, the poverty, the hatred, the homelessness, the loneliness of countless people in our society today.

To identify with those in need gives us an entirely different perspective. It is easy to do so with people we know, members of our own family or friends. Yet, the Gospel asks us to do the same with the stranger among us. It is a compassion that calls us to love. And, yes, it is love that is at the heart of the Gospel, the heart of the law. **Who is my neighbor?** Our neighbor is the one we allow to enter our heart, the one we love.

Implications for today

The parable of the Good Samaritan has implications for us today. In so many instances, we are asked to help those in need - the single parent, senior citizens, the young, the unemployed, the person with AIDS, the homeless, the timber communities suffering from economic depression, people on welfare. The record of our response to such needs is remarkable and incredible.

Yet, the Gospel asks us for more, as the Gospel always does. The Gospel asks us to be people of compassion and love, to have eyes of faith to recognize the presence of Christ in everyone around us.

We can hear a Sunday Gospel, nod our heads in agreement and move on to celebrate these glorious days of summer. Yet, last Sunday's Gospel should haunt us as we face the challenges in our political system as well as the needs that surround us in our own communities.

“Who is my neighbor?” The answer we give can make all the difference. May God's grace and peace be yours.