

The Rev. Joel C. Daniels, PhD  
Rector, The Nevil Memorial Church of St. George  
Ardmore, Pennsylvania  
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 14, 2019

Proper 10, Lectionary Year C (Track 2):  
Deuteronomy 30:9-14  
Psalm 25:1-9  
Colossians 1:1-14  
Luke 10:25-37

### **How to be a neighbor**

Today's gospel reading is referred to as the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is extremely well-known; even people who don't know much about the Bible have heard of the Good Samaritan.

A man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho. Robbers fell upon him, beat him, and left him for dead. A priest came by but didn't stop. A Levite, the same. A Samaritan, however, was "moved with pity," and took care of him: bandaged his wounds and took him to a nearby inn. He left him with the innkeeper, paying the bill in advance. He promised to return and cover whatever expenses the innkeeper had incurred.

The parable is told by Jesus in response to a lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" After telling the parable, Jesus asks, "Which [person in the parable] ... was a neighbor to the man?" The Samaritan, of course. Jesus tells the lawyer, "Go and do likewise."

Go and do likewise. There is at least one obvious moral to this story: we should try and take care of people who are bad off. We shouldn't pass by on the other side. When we see people in need, hurting, in trouble, we must go and do likewise, like the Samaritan, like the one who didn't pass by on the other side, but attended to the needs of his neighbor. It is our sacred responsibility to participate in God's healing of the world. This is the great commandment: Love God and love your neighbor. An essential part of our vocation is be in the world, loving the world, healing the world.

There is more to the parable that would have been clear to those listening to Jesus. In particular, the fact that the laudable character in the story is a Samaritan would be provocative. The relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans was complicated. You may have heard the saying that a jerk is someone like you, but more so. The Samaritans and the Jews were very much like each other, such that they had enough in common to have bad blood between them. They were not aliens to each other, the way they were with the surrounding Gentiles. They both claimed to worship the God of Israel: Jews knew that he was to be worshiped in the Temple, while the Samaritans worshiped him in the "high places." These differences were accentuated over time, as such differences frequently are, such that the Samaritans and Jews were bitter rivals.

For the hero of the story to be a Samaritan, then, and explicitly not one of the priests or Levites associated with the Temple, would have pricked the conscience of Jesus' hearers. There is a fairly obvious moral to this as well: there is mercy that is shown in unexpected quarters, and we should remain aware of that, and find inspiration wherever, and among whomever, we find it. Perhaps not of our religious community or ethnic group; more bitingly, maybe even among people we just don't like, people who are wrong about important things. They may be showing mercy, being a neighbor, in their own ways, and that is something to appreciate.

On the flip side, we shouldn't hesitate to help those who are otherwise our rivals. We don't only have a responsibility to those in our own group (religious or ethnic or political or social or

otherwise). The universality of God's love should be reflected in the universality of the Church's scope of concern, even when that is difficult to do.

A person who comes to this community learns quickly what the default religion of the area is: worship of the Philadelphia Eagles. Not too long after moving here, a newcomer was at a local public house, and saw that there was a beer on tap with the name, Dallas Stinks. Confused, he asked the bartender, "What's the deal with the beer, Dallas Stinks?" The bartender looked at him intently and said evenly, but with intensity, "Dallas stinks."

But perhaps even fans of the Dallas Cowboys are capable of showing mercy. Perhaps even fans of the Dallas Cowboys are within the Church's scope of concern. Perhaps even they are our neighbors and we are theirs.

There is something to be said as well about the innkeeper in this parable, a character in the story who doesn't get enough attention, to my mind. Inns were not entirely respectable establishments in the first century, no doubt due in part to the transient nature of the clientele. This wasn't the Jericho Road Best Western or Motel 6. The innkeeper and his family would have been running a small business, with who knows how much success, trying to keep the place respectable and themselves safe. And one day there is a knock on the door, and a man, a Samaritan, comes in holding a beaten and bloodied person. He wants to drop him off and let the injured man convalesce there, promising to reimburse the innkeeper later.

You can imagine the innkeeper not wanting to be part of this; had there been hospitals back then, you can imagine the innkeeper insisting that his inn wasn't one of them. Take the man somewhere else. How could he know who the injured man was? How could he be sure that the Samaritan would return to cover the expenses?

We don't get to hear the end of the story, but if the innkeeper did indeed provide lodging for the man, then we can see how it required him taking a risk in order to act as neighbor; it was risky to extend charity in that case. It is not a straightforward matter. We don't know what the innkeeper did, but we see him being presented with a similar choice as the priest and Levite and Samaritan, a similar opportunity to fulfill the commandment to love one's neighbor.

There are other, complementary, ways of reading the parable as well. We believe that the entire Bible—from the first word to the last word—is about Jesus Christ. Every jot and tittle testify in their own way that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. We can therefore read the parable in this light as well, as being about Jesus. This is how the early Church sometimes interpreted it, allegorically, as early as the second century.<sup>1</sup> In an allegorical reading, the characters are symbolic of other things also. In this reading, the traveler is Adam, both the first Adam and as representative of all human beings. He leaves Jerusalem, the holy city, the city where God dwells, to travel to Jericho. The word Jericho in Hebrew sounds like the word moon, representing something created, something that dies, something tied in with pagan worship. This road is the path of perdition. The robbers that attack represent sin. Sin leaves a person wounded, diminished, inhibited from being his or her full self. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The Samaritan is Christ himself who brings life, eternal and abundant, through the forgiveness of sins. It is Christ who comes to every wounded sinner to restore them to health and wholeness.

But he doesn't leave them alone to fend for themselves. Jesus takes them to the inn, which is the Church. It is the Church that should be a place of respite, a place to be safe from sin in Christ, where healing can occur. The innkeeper, in this reading, represents the apostles, who await the Samaritan's return, that is, Jesus' second coming.

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<sup>1</sup> The following is attributed to Irenaeus (AD 130-202) and Origen (AD 184-253). From them it was picked up by Ambrose (340-397) and, most famously, by Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in his *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*.

The Church today—those of us who gather to worship Christ—are the descendants of the apostles, and we continue in the apostles’ ministry. We continue to populate the Church as forgiven sinners, and we do our best (or should) to participate in God’s salvation of the world.

We don’t only do so by our outreach, however, important as those ministries are. Our epistle reading from today is from St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Paul writes from Rome, having been detained, after having gone on the missionary journeys, having founded churches throughout the Mediterranean, having preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the region. In Colossians, however, one of the points he makes repeatedly is that his ministry at that point is prayer. He has “not ceased praying for” them, he says. And, this ministry of prayer is no less important than the exciting journeys that he had been on, those trips that had more obvious and concrete results. Prayer, Paul makes clear, is ministry. Prayer is ministry to the world, a way of being neighbor to the world, just as much as any outreach. It is no less important.

In a moment we will have our Prayers of the People. There, we will pray for a whole list of persons and things, interceding for them and for the world. This praying is the job of us modern-day innkeepers, we who are heirs of the apostles, living in the Church. Praying to God through Christ in the Spirit is one of the ways we love our neighbors, and it is important.

Go and do likewise.