

“Go and Do Likewise”

One day, a certain unnamed lawyer had become bored with the local competition and had decided to stand up and test the new Rabbi in town, Jesus. This lawyer, cut from a similar cloth as the Pharisees, had spent most of his life playing on a winning team. He throws Jesus his best pitch, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus, the gifted teacher, skillfully directs the lawyer away from philosophical speculations, verbal jousting, and abstract premises. Jesus steers him to the sacred Scriptures where God’s love story is revealed.

The lawyer, frightened by the relational intimacy this love story reveals, quickly finds the technically correct answer but reads it back to Jesus more like a student plagiarizing from Spark Notes than someone who has deeply absorbed and digested the lesson: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love our neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus’ lesson plan is not a brand new curriculum in terms of content. The lawyer is quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus in his response to Jesus. It was part of a prayer called the Shema which practicing Jews to this day repeat twice each day. So it is no surprise that the lawyer knew it by heart and could recite from rote memory. But what was new about Jesus’ lesson plan was how the principle of love was to be applied and the radical way of practicing it in daily life. The pious lawyer knows that the two great commandments just requiring him to love God, neighbor, and self are so comprehensive that he cannot possibly claim to have kept them perfectly and neither can we if we are completely honest with ourselves.

One of the hidden jewels of this story is how our human rationalizations for not loving unreservedly are exposed. When the lawyer asks, “Who is my neighbor?” We can see a part of ourselves who wants what the lawyer wants: a reason to justify our not slowing down our busy lives to help someone in need because they fall outside of what we define as our neighbor or our priorities. All too often we define neighbor as one who looks, acts, and talks like us and is deserving of our help, time or attention.

A number of years ago at another parish in which I was serving I had an experience that reminds me of the priest in today’s story who did not have time to

help a person on the side of the road. I was on my way to assist in an early morning worship service when I flew by a parked car on the side of the road after a large windstorm. Looking back in my rear view mirror I saw two parishioners standing by their car moving a large branch to the side of the road. It was obvious that they were not beaten or bleeding to death but I was too anxious about getting to the church on time to at least stop and inquire as to how I might be able to help. But because God is who God is, the couple became the best “neighbors” possible because they were able to extend mercy and forgiveness to me. Fortunately, we were able to talk it through later and experience forgiveness, but to this day it remains for me an important reminder of the importance of remaining open to God’s agenda and surrendering my own.

Before I had this very humbling experience I was very tempted to demonize the priest and the Levite in today’s gospel lesson. We don’t need a Ph.D. in Christianity to know the moral of the story. What happened to the man at the side of the road was horrible. But what was even worse was the lack of compassion of those who could have helped him but didn’t. It doesn’t matter that the badly beaten man didn’t use the best judgment when he decided to travel alone on a dangerous road. Or that he might have been a member of another culture, ethnic group or questionable religion. All that matters is what the Good Samaritan did. He saw a need. He could do something about it. And he did it.

It is so tempting to see the Samaritan as the hero (which clearly he is) and quickly dismiss the priest and the Levite and move on to the next story. Jesus knew the inclusion of the priest and the Levite were a critical part of the story and that is why he included them. They were critical because they personified the resistance to authentic spirituality that we all encounter as human beings on our spiritual journeys. Jesus did not choose the priest and the Levite because they were the very worst human beings but because they were among what many considered were the very best examples of human beings. If they were terrible people to begin with, the story becomes totally predictable and loses all of its spiritual juice.

We would do well to remember the good reasons why, like the priest and the Levite, we pass by those in need. We too have urgent duties that will not permit delay. We too worry about being taken advantage of by a person potentially feigning distress and running a scam. Or perhaps we are afraid of being attacked while helping someone on a deserted road. Sometimes we think we are not qualified to help or that someone more skilled will take charge. Many times we

don't have the tools to handle the exposure to raw pain that we will likely encounter. We, too, can find ourselves overwhelmed by all the requests for help and succumb to the temptation to first or only help those who are the most deserving in our way of thinking or that we have time for. These are real concerns and internal resistances to serving that we need to acknowledge in order to not be controlled by them and do something about them, and most importantly, allow God to transform them.

The primary arena for this transformation to occur is in our prayer lives. In a state of deeper contemplation, God's voice has a much better chance of rising above our internal chatter, distractions, rationalizations and cultural blinders so we can see God in the unrecognizable places He dwells—like the beaten man in today's parable—and reject the temptation to “pass on by the other side” because ultimately all of God's children are our neighbors.

No matter which character in the parable of the Good Samaritan, that you and I are presently identifying with—the lawyer, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, the wounded or the inn keeper—we belong to Jesus. Jesus is the one who demonstrates mercy, embodies the fullness of God's love to all of his creation, and liberates us from all of our reasons for “passing on the other side” when we are confronted with human suffering.

At the end of the day, despite having received Jesus' crash course in love, we, like the lawyer, are left with this penetrating question: “Who is my neighbor?” We are invited to struggle to find our own answers, with God's help, in the support of Christian community. Today we have received some guidance. Imagine the person who looks, acts, and talks least like you and that you believe is the least deserving of your help, time, attention or financial resources. Discover and re-engage with the compassionate Samaritan within you, contemplate the mysteries of Jesus' unfailing mercy and loving service and “go and do likewise” for this is what gives eternal life. Amen.