



July 14, 2013

## Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

*(Jesus said) "Which of the three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" He (the legal scholar) answered, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."—Luke 10:36-37*

Dear Friends;

An engineer died and found himself at the heavenly gates. He rang the doorbell and St. Peter answered. St Peter asked him his name and the saint checked his list. He said, "I don't find you on the list. You need to go downstairs." So the engineer goes to hell.

A month later St. Peter realized he had made a mistake. The engineer indeed was meant to be in heaven. St Peter goes to hell to get the poor engineer. And he notices that all kinds of changes have taken place: there are ceiling fans, air conditioning, swimming pools, ice dispensers and drinking fountains. St Peter tells the devil there has been a terrible mistake. "I have come to get the engineer." The devil says, "You can't have him back." St Peter tells the devil, "If you don't let him go I will sue you!" To which the devil replies, "And where in heaven do expect to find a lawyer?"

Questions in Jesus' culture are rarely innocent requests for information. They are more often a challenge to someone's personal honor. And Luke makes it clear that this is what the legal scholar is attempting. This question is meant to shame Jesus. So Jesus turns the insult around on the questioner. How do you (the expert in the written law of God) read it? "You should love God...and love your neighbor as yourself." The lawyer shames himself by answering his own question.

The expert pretends to be ignorant. Jesus reveals the lie in the lawyer's question. So he has one last chance to "save face." He asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Again another lie, this expert knows the answer. He just quoted Leviticus in answer to the first question. The same book defines "neighbor" as your "family" and "your own people." In a brilliant move that will shame the legal expert, Jesus crafts a parable that will challenge the accepted cultural understanding.

The robbers leave the victim stripped of everything and half-dead. It will be impossible to identify his ethnicity by clothing or accent. Helping him would carry the risk of helping a foreigner. That would violate purity boundaries. This is the dilemma the priest faces. The priest riding a donkey in accord with his elite status would have noticed the victim and ponders. If the victim is a non-Judean the priest would be defiled by touching him. The priest who had just fulfilled his glorious role at the temple would have to return shame-faced for ritual purification.

The Levite another temple functionary would have been on foot and closer to the victim. He very likely saw the priest from afar. He sees the priest's response to the victim. If the priest did not give first aid, why should the Levite. That would be an insult to the priest. Besides, the victim could possibly be one who lives in Shechem—a Samaritan. We know what God thinks of them!

Shockingly, the third person in Jesus' story is not a Judean layperson (as would be typical) but a Samaritan. This hated outsider feels a gut turning compassion for the victim. The Samaritan is in a 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' position. The Samaritan takes a risk. The victim could end up hating him when he gains consciousness. Samaritan oil and wine were considered impure. They would defile a Judean victim.

But the Samaritan does what the Levite could have done. He helps the man. He uses his wine, oil and bandages. The Samaritan does what the priest could have done. He lifts the man onto his animal and takes him to an inn and continues to care for him. Finally, in contrast to the robbers the Samaritan promises to return and pay for any additional expenses.

The crazy thing about the story, should the victim die the family would not be able to find the robbers. So they would go after the Samaritan. They would kill the benefactor. If the victim lives he may rage at the man for defiling his purity. We cannot underestimate the importance of ritual purity to these people. "Be holy as the Lord your God is holy."—Leviticus. Holiness was about being set apart from others.

The astute lawyer will now recognize his new impending shame. His question was "Who is my neighbor?" now is turned by Jesus, "To whom must you become a neighbor?" The answer comes, "one must be neighbor to anyone and everyone in need. One must show compassion to all—even one's hated enemies." A hated outsider extends compassionate love to his enemy. What a masterful stroke against communal prejudice! Compassion to all is the new purity standard.

Fr. Greg Boyle, SJ works with gangs. In his book *Tattoos on the Heart* he puts it this way, "The strategy of Jesus is not in taking the right stand on issues, but rather standing in the right place—with the outcast and those relegated to the margins."

Peace,

*Fr. Ron*