

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost, Year C

July 11, 2010

Deuteronomy 30: 9-14, Psalm 25: 1-10, Colossians 1: 1-14, Luke 10: 25-37

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

{9} The LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, *{10}* when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. *{11}* Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. *{12}* It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" *{13}* Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" *{14}* No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Psalm 25:1-10

{1} To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. *{2}* O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me. *{3}* Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. *{4}* Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. *{5}* Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. *{6}* Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. *{7}* Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! *{8}* Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. *{9}* He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. *{10}* All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Colossians 1:1-14

{1} Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, *{2}* To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. *{3}* In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, *{4}* for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, *{5}* because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel *{6}* that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. *{7}* This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, *{8}* and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit. *{9}* For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, *{10}* so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. *{11}* May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully *{12}* giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. *{13}* He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, *{14}* in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 10:25-37

{25} Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" *{26}* He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" *{27}* He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." *{28}* And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." *{29}* But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" *{30}* Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. *{31}* Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. *{32}* So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. *{33}* But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. *{34}* He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal,

brought him to an inn, and took care of him. {35} The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' {36} Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" {37} He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Picture this: a classroom- could be elementary, middle school, high school, college, or even graduate school; it's a Friday, about five minutes before the end of the day; the teacher is wrapping up the lesson. Without so much as a word to each other or even a glance, a "code of silence" now blankets the students in the room. The reason is that the teacher has apparently forgotten about a test (or paper, or 200 pages of reading) for the coming Monday. Three minutes and counting. Sweet! Then, a hand goes up somewhere in the front of the room. "Yes?", asks the teacher. "What about that test (paper, reading) that we were supposed to have on Monday?" "Oh, thank you for reminding me!", says the teacher.

You just *had* to ask, didn't you? You couldn't help yourself! You just couldn't leave well enough alone!

That's exactly how I feel about the smarty-pants lawyer in today's Gospel story. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Okay, maybe that one can slide. But no, he just had to ask that follow up, "And who is my neighbor?" Couldn't leave well enough alone. Couldn't leave us all with that wonderfully blissful defense: "Well, you never said anything about it!" Couldn't allow us the shelter of ambiguity.

Even though the story of the "Good Samaritan" is among the most well known and most beautifully written in the entire Bible, I'd just as soon not have known it and would have preferred that it never got in in the first place. Why? Because it "stings". Every time I read or hear it. It stings even some two thousand years after its original telling.

Silly lawyer. You just had to ask.

So, what do we do with this story? Do we ignore it? Do we look for a creative "loophole"? I remember a *Saturday Night Live* skit from many years ago featuring a consortium of millionaires looking for a way to successfully shrink a camel so that it would be small enough to fit through the eye of a needle. This was, obviously, an attempt to get around Jesus' saying, found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that it was "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Interestingly enough, that quote is part of another story about another young man asking Jesus what he must do to “inherit eternal life” or to more fully keep the commandments.

You know by now that I don’t believe Jesus was into the shame, blame, and guilt thing, but I do believe today’s story was intended to “sting”, was intended to make the hearers uncomfortable. I believe it is intentionally open ended because it offers both a challenge as well as an invitation. The challenge is to keep asking the question: “And who is my neighbor?”. The invitation is to enter into the transforming journey with Jesus and to see the world and others as God sees them. Jesus never intended to end the discussion.

We need to pay attention and listen to the ways the story “stings”. God does not always want us to be so comfortable and satisfied with “the way things are”, especially when it relates to our acceptance of the preventable suffering of others. God promises us “new hearts”. As the familiar saying goes, “God not only comforts the afflicted, but sometimes afflicts the comfortable.”

With all that in mind, let’s take a look at a few other aspects of the story of the “Good Samaritan”.

First, except for the Samaritan, no one else escapes unscathed, not even the listeners. According to the commentaries, much like our modern “priest, minister, and rabbi” jokes, the expected sequence for the “Good Samaritan” story would have been priest, Levite, and ordinary Jewish man. Most of those types of stories were intended to poke fun at the religious elites while holding up the nobility of the common person. But, Jesus had a surprise in store. Those listening would have expected the hero to be someone like them. Instead, the hero was a despised Samaritan, probably hated most by those on lowest levels of Jewish society, who themselves would have welcomed a scapegoat of their own. Everyone is challenged here.

Second, if we accept this story solely on the moral level as a call to right action on behalf of those most vulnerable and in need, then today the idea of “neighbor” has to be greatly expanded beyond the individual. Our world is tied together by complex political and economic factors. So, our neighbors are now entire countries, cultures, races, religions, classes, etc. Are there systems that keep whole groups of people beaten down in poverty for the benefit of another group that wishes to remain rich? What can we do about it?

Third, I’ve quoted before from the funeral homily for the late Senator Ted Kennedy. Here’s my paraphrase: “Our world is much more complex than Jesus could have imagined, so finding ways of translating His

words into actions is not always readily apparent. Life, indeed, is complex. There are circumstances, particularly when encountering those engaged in self-destructive behaviors or who refuse to change chronic and unhelpful ways of acting, when the best way to help is by *not* helping. Sometimes the “Good Samaritan” must intentionally pass by. This is always a heart wrenching decision. I guess the common term is “tough love”.

Finally, the Church of the first three centuries (by means of a fellow named Origen) offers an interesting interpretation of the story of the “Good Samaritan”. It is really bad on biblical exegesis but really good on grace. So, don’t try this at home! According to the “allegorical method” everything in a given passage is symbolic for something else. In this story, *Jesus* is the good Samaritan and we are the ones lying on the side of the road, unable to help ourselves. Jesus is the one who is always “moved with pity” and lifts us up. Even if you don’t particularly like this interpretation, how does the story change if, instead of seeing ourselves in one of the characters, we see Jesus as the Good Samaritan?

Last, but not least, I want to revisit the “camel through the eye of the needle” story. As you recall, another young man wants to know what (or what more) he must “do”. When Jesus invites the man to give everything to the poor and follow Him, the young man “goes away sad”, unable or unwilling to accept the way that Jesus offers. Jesus then spoke about the difficulty for the rich to “enter the kingdom of heaven”. The disciples, “greatly astounded”, asked, “then who can be saved?”

Here’s the answer as recoded by St. Mark’s Gospel: “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’” (Mark 10: 27)

Gratefully, when it comes to the story of the “Good Samaritan”, *we* do not have the final word, God does.

Let us pray. Show me your ways< O LORD, and teach me your paths. Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting...Remember me according to your steadfast love and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD. (From Psalm 25)

AMEN.