

## “The Good Samaritan” for Lawyers... and Priests

- *Red Mass*  
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The gospel we have just heard is the familiar story of what we call “The Good Samaritan”. The very term “Good Samaritan” has come to mean for us—whether applied to a hospital, a social work, a foundation, or a parish—something like a helper of the needy, charity to people left on the side of the road, or sometimes a “Do-Gooder”. What this gospel has come to mean more popularly is an example of how we tame the gospel so it is more comfortable to our lives or liberalize the gospel so that it fits rather than challenges our views.

In order to make known the true meaning of this gospel and its relevance to us in this Red Mass, let me ask you to participate in a little role playing. First of all, I need some lawyers to represent the lawyer who asked the question of Jesus. Do I have any lawyers here?! Now I need two priests to represent the Aaronic line priest and the Levite line priests, both of whom saw and passed by the man in the ditch. Do I have two priests here?! Since you all have roles, I guess I am forced to take the role of Jesus. Oh well, I accept! We’ll leave for the moment who is the man robbed, beaten, and left wounded in the ditch and who is this Good Samaritan.

True to form the lawyer—that’s you—presents a problem to Jesus: “What must I do to inherit everlasting life?” Jesus, in effect, tells him to look it up in his law books: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” There is just a touch of the Socratic in Jesus! The lawyer correctly locates the pertinent passages, correlates them and cites them correctly:

“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 your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus gives him an “A” and says “Do this and you shall live”, i.e. inherit everlasting life. The emphasis is on “do”. But the lawyer—I will not hazard to say this is typical—would rather discuss than do, and would like to get verbal confirmation that he is right in his views, i.e. to justify himself.

Thanks, role-playing lawyers, you’ve done well. Now listen! It’s time for my two volunteer priests.

Some man, anyman—especially anyman—gets waylaid, robbed, mugged, assaulted, stripped of his clothing for resale, and left lying by the side of the road, which just happens to be the road from Jerusalem from which priests come, and here they come. The first priest—let’s say a

Jesuit—sees the naked, groaning man and walks by. The second priest from another branch of priests—let's say a Dominican—also sees and passes by. Both of them knew clearly they had a commandment in their religion which required them to attend to the man whether alive or dead, both “to love the neighbor” and “to love the stranger”. So there is the first shock in this not so innocent story. The priests did not obey their own clear religious obligations. You lawyers are shocked at these two heartless priests, aren't you?!

Why do you think they did that? Martin Luther King in that fateful year for him of 1968 gave an interpretation of why they passed by while the Samaritan did not. He says:

“I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible these men were afraid... And so the first question that the priest and the Levite asked was, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me...? But then the good Samaritan came by and he reversed the question: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?” (And King went on to say) “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?””

As we know, Martin Luther King went to Memphis to help the sanitation workers and there he was assassinated.

So the story and the point for us is not whether touching the man was a defilement of one's purity or some sort of liability issue or discomfort. Rather it's the fundamental question of thinking of oneself, getting so used to that, whether from religious or cultural or habitual reasons, that one loses the ability to think and feel first of all about the life of the other and what will happen to him or her if I do not do something. (By way of a side-comment: Pope Francis says that whenever someone has told him that he has given alms to a person on the street, Francis has asked, “Did you look him in the eye?” Few say yes. Then Francis asks, “Did you touch the person?” Hardly anyone did so. Perhaps that casts some light on this story about being able to think of the other and touch his or her humanity.)

The Samaritan did see, and stopped, and was moved by compassion, and salved and bound his wounds, clothed him, put him on his donkey, took him to an inn, cared for him, and provided for his longer-term recovery. The real shock in the story is not the priests—you are off the hook!—but what the Samaritan meant to the lawyers. He was plain and simply “enemy”; both enemy ethnically and theologically. The hook in the parable is that “Good Samaritan” would mean something like “Good Al Qaeda Follower”, or “Good Tea Party Republican”, or to shift the viewpoint “Good Bleeding Heart Liberal”. When Jesus asks the lawyer, “OK, you asked who is your neighbor whom you should love in order to inherit everlasting life”, you can give your own answer, “Who was neighbor to the man on the side of the road?” The lawyer can't bring himself even to use the name of the enemy, the hated Samaritan, but says more generically, “The one who treated him with compassion.” It's enough of an admission for Jesus who says, “Then go and do the same.” The emphasis is not think, discuss, agree, see who's right, but “go and do”.

This is the untamed gospel—not the undemanding, comfortable “Good Samaritan” of our usage; and this too is the de-liberalized gospel—not what you think or even feel, or how much you are moved—but what you do, do not just to some but to all, even to those you think uneducated or

misguided or inimical to you. Darn those gospel parables! No matter what roles we play, they let no one off the hook because they have a hook which turns upside down and inside out our most fundamental views, values, and customary ways of acting.

Who today plays the role of the man left half dead on the side of the road? That's for us to realize: the gay person, the prisoner, the parolee, the undocumented, the children migrants, the homeless, the sexually abused, the victims of domestic violence, the unattended and uneducated child, the enemy abroad or within our borders, the racially profiled and targeted, the poor, anyone really unlike us. Martin Luther King asks us: "If I don't go and do something for them, what will happen to them?" The Christian tradition quickly came to see that all of us—humanity itself—are lying wounded beside the road. The Ultimate Stranger, the one come from elsewhere and who thinks and acts other than we do, in such overturning ways, Jesus of Nazareth stops, salves, binds, gives a ride, and cares for us, both short and long-term.

Let me give the very last word in this Red Mass homily—since we miss our Archbishop among us—let me give the last word to the one who wears white rather than red, Pope Francis. Commenting this very month on this passage of the Good Samaritan he says:

“A Samaritan, as he went on his way, saw him and had compassion: his heart was open, he was human. And humanity drew him near (to God)... The Samaritan let God write his life... He changed everything that night because the Lord had drawn near in the person of the poor man, wounded, badly wounded, thrown on the way.”

And the Pope asks us, all of us, whatever our roles: “Do you have the capacity to find the word of God in the story of each day?”