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Luke 10:25-37

The Good Samaritan

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Today's Gospel of the parable of the Good Samaritan is a challenging one and a powerful way of saying what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount – be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate.

In today's text, Jesus has an interchange with a lawyer and he mentions a Levite then he tells a story about a Samaritan. First, we meet the lawyer, an expert in Jewish religious law; a respected authority in reading and interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures. Then we meet a Levite, one who was appointed to safeguard the Tabernacle and to serve the priest. Finally, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Let's look at how it unfolds.

Luke tells us a lawyer asks Jesus the first question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In turn, Jesus responds with two questions: "What is written in the law and what is your interpretation of what is written?" The lawyer answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all you being, with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus told him "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live." The lawyer asks yet another question: "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus might have sensed the narrowness of the lawyer's question, as if he wanted to know how much of the human family he was supposed to lovingly embrace and care for. Jesus did not answer the question; rather, he told a simple story of a man left half dead on the roadside. Shockingly, two people walked right by man in dire need – a priest and a Levite. The person who had the compassion to stop was a Samaritan. This man applied first aid and took the hurting, suffering man to a local inn to care for him. He gave the innkeeper money to take care of him and he promised the proprietor that on his way back, he'd stop at the inn again and repay him if he spent more money than he was given.

I'm going to stop for a moment to say a few words about Samaritans. There is a very long history of Jews' hatred of Samaritans, but I'll simply highlight a few of the reasons for this hostility. Samaritans were regarded as heretics and traitors. They recognized only the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They built their own temple on Mount Gerizig and proclaimed it as God's holy place. This was considered an act of blasphemy by the Jews, whose most holy place was at Jerusalem. They intermarried with the Assyrians so they were neither fully Jewish nor fully Gentile. They had strict dietary laws. The Jews would go miles out of their way to pass Samaritan country, nor would they even talk to a Samaritan. Today, Samaritan territory is on the West Bank and is under Israel's administration.

Implications for us

Commenting on the relevance of the Good Samaritan Gospel, Pope Francis reminds us how the “holy ones,” the priests and Levites, looked at the man by the wayside and ignored what they saw. Today we have a plethora of examples of the suffering of our sisters and brothers around the globe: hatred, bigotry, racism, poverty, hunger, health issues for people who have with little or no access to insurance, illiteracy a diminishing planet in peril. Pope Francis says, “Let us never forget this: before such suffering of millions of people, we cannot remain spectators.”

This parable invites us to see things from a very different perspective. The way the story should have gone is that the “religious ones” should have tended to the man in need, but that didn’t happen. It was the dreaded Samaritan who is the neighbor to the man.

Who is the Samaritan to us? What group do we fear or despise? Blacks? Latinos? Arabs? Muslims? Do categories of race or class or religion define “otherness?” Who passes by the Samaritan? The Church? The government? The rich? The one who looks like us? ME?

And Jesus said, “Be compassionate as your heavenly Father.”

And Jesus said, “When you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.”

And Jesus said, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with the one who has none and whoever has food is to do likewise.”

And Jesus said, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

And Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

And Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down her/his life for his friends.”

And Jesus said, “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them.”