

Homily for July 15, 2001  
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Deuteronomy 30:10-14  
Colossians 1:15-20  
Luke 10: 25-37

## *Can we imagine our enemies as capable of doing good for us?*

When we hear the question, “Who is my neighbor?,” the universal reply has become: “anyone in need,” and our parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke chapter 10 is usually sighted as the source of that teaching.

But that is not the teaching of this parable. For Jesus, this is the wrong question – who is my neighbor? It implies a certain selectivity. “Who are the ones I am required to love?” The lawyer was hoping to “justify himself” expecting that the definition of “neighbor” would be limited to the people he knew and loved best – his social peers and fellow Jews. But Jesus turns the question upside down through his use of the parable of the Good Samaritan. His focus is upon how to be a neighbor to another, not upon who the neighbor is that I am obliged to help. The parable is intended to shock those who hear it...it is intended to shock us who hear it today as well. The respected religious leaders, the priest and Levite (a temple assistant) are not the heroes of the story. The “neighborly” person is a Samaritan, someone considered ritually impure by scholars of the law – a foreigner and heretic to the Hebrews – in short, an enemy.

Take a look at the story again – if you compare this parable with other stories Jesus used, your perspective shifts from considering the people who are walking down the road to considering the victim lying in the ditch. You see, in most of Jesus’ parables the central character is the one whom everyone else in the story comes in contact with. Here the central figure, the one with whom the audience is supposed to identify, is not the Samaritan but the victim. One commentator on this passage notes that the hearers of the story “are to taste his fear...share his desperate consternation when two of his countrymen...pass him by. Then they are to feel all his mixed emotions when a stranger, a schismatic, stops to help him.” The original hearers of the story were likely to ask, “Would they, if they were in that situation accept help from such a stranger, a near – Gentile, and in the process incur ritual impurity from being touched by this Samaritan?” To this Galilean/Jewish audience, Jesus poses the question: Could you accept an act of kindness from a Samaritan? Could you recognize God’s gracious presence in such an unlikely source? His challenge to them is to recognize the link that binds people beyond divisions of race, color and creed, to discover God’s

presence where they would least expect it and then in turn to become such a surprising grace to others. ...To be equally good to our enemies.

We can recall the centuries-old enmity between Jews and Samaritans. Ever since the return from the Babylonian exile, ill will existed between these two peoples who shared a common faith and heritage. Until the time of Jesus, a state of mutual hatred and terrorism existed (Luke 9: 51-56). To imagine that a loathsome Samaritan would have acted better than an priest or Levite making his scheduled service to the Temple in Jerusalem would have been beyond the ken of Jesus' audience. More over, the fact that he pours expensive oil and wine on the victim's wounds, cares for him at an inn, and pays twenty-four days worth of boarding for him, as well as assuring recompense for any further expense, would stagger the minds of his listeners.

The parable forces us as readers and as hearers to put together "good" and "Samaritan." The outsider provides the model of love of neighbor; the apostate fulfills the law. Such a startling act of generosity resonates with the proclamation of the Kingdom. Only in a vision that sees all within the overarching sovereignty of God could such a scene as this be imagined. Trust is possible – even the trusting of an enemy – when one relies upon God. For Jesus it was possible to imagine that an enemy could act with compassion.

We might put ourselves battered in that ditch and ask if we are ready to be helped by those whom we would class as outsiders – dare we consider our enemies today and ask whether we could imagine them as doing human things to us. Who today teaches us and enacts for us the meaning of love of God and neighbor?

The lawyer grudgingly answers, "The one who treated him with mercy," – he cannot even bear to say the name Samaritan. Can we live out this answer? Let us pray, O good and gracious God open our eyes to see and to cherish the capacity for compassion in those whom we despise, mistrust, fear and shun. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

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capable of doing good for us?