

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 15th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-

Deuteronomy 30: 10-14 Psalm 69 Colossians 1: 15-20 Luke 10: 25-37

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

“Good Samaritan” has become part of our language, whether we are Christian or not. The other day I was trying to help my mother out of a car into her wheelchair. We were at a parking lot and the car was on an incline. The wheelchair was rolling a bit. A woman came over and held the wheelchair. I thanked her and said, “You certainly are a good Samaritan.” I thought about the incident later. I felt sure she would know what I meant, whether she were a Christian or not; so familiar is the story of the Good Samaritan. There are even “Good Samaritan” laws in our civil code to protect the passerby who helps a victim, from being sued later. We have known Good Samaritans in our parish who gather clothing for the poor, turkeys for families at Thanksgiving and who make sandwiches to bring to the homeless. But these Good Samaritans are one of us, out of our community. The Samaritan in the gospel story was from “the other side.” It’s difficult to hear this parable afresh because we have tamed it so.

Parables aren’t supposed to pat us on the back or provide us with tidy formulas. They are meant to provoke the thoughts and imaginations of the hearers. We are so removed from the original hearers and have so tamed this story, we miss its cutting edge and its provocation to our tidy inner world and to our views of religious practice. Before we come down to hard on the priests and Levites, we must remember that according to their traditional religion, they were not allowed to touch a dead body. Since the man was “half dead,” they might have thought he was dead and felt no qualms about leaving a dead body in the ditch, thus observing their customs and piety.

The Samaritans were traitors to the Jewish faith and nation. They had allied themselves with the enemies of the Jews and the Jews, in turn, had destroyed their temple. Jesus’ deliberate choice of a Samaritan has the sharp edge that might enable the parable to pierce the shield of traditional thinking and presumptions about people. Remember that Jesus is directing the story to the Jewish scholar of the law. Whose side would God be on in this parable? The scholar of the law has previously summed up the law as loving God and loving neighbor as self. So, one would presume that God would be on the side of the one who shows mercy. Who, therefore, was neighbor to the victimized traveler? The answer given to Jesus’

query is, “The one who treated him with mercy.”

But mercy is the very experience the Jews have had at the hands of God. Who has God been for the Jews, but the One who has shown them mercy? God’s merciful treatment of them is the very story of the bible, the story of God’s covenant with Israel. God is the One who has been neighbor to them by showing mercy when they were beaten up and lying by the side of the road half dead. The scholar may have the Law memorized; may teach it to the uneducated and be able to debate it with other scholars. But it is the despised infidel, the Samaritan, who has encapsulated the Law by putting it into practice. And in showing mercy, the Samaritan has mirrored God’s merciful acts towards the Jews. The parable reflects who Jesus was for them and for us. He is the merciful face of God turned toward us. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and when he gets there he will enflesh the mercy revealed in this parable. By his death and resurrection, he will bring life to neighbor and stranger alike. And in doing that, he will tear down the walls that separate us and cause so much animosity between us. This parable certainly shows God working outside the religious and observant world of Jesus’ listeners. This parable also threatens our sureties about friend and foe, God and religion, custom and religious practice.

With whom do we identify? Maybe with the Samaritan. He must have known from his own experience what it felt like to be “beaten up” and left behind. His own experience as a member of a despised group, an outsider to the religious and national thinking of the Jews, may have made him respond to the victim by the side of the road. He knew what it was like to be victimized. The preacher might invite the hearers to find places in their lives where they have been excluded, victimized, judged. Feeling and remembering what that pain felt like might help us be sensitive to the victims of abuse, harassment, negligence, favoritism, racism, etc., whom we come upon in our daily lives. We don’t have to travel far, the road to Jericho might pass through our own homes, workplaces, and neighborhoods.

Of course, there is the massive victimization of third world countries due to their debts to first world nations and banks. They will never get out of the ditch unless we, who have the power to do so, find a way to help them. There is a strong sentiment among religious people today to urge the world’s rich countries to do something about the international debt. Reminding us of the Jewish ideal of canceling debts for the jubilee years, Pope John Paul II has said (“Tertio Millennio

Advent”), “Christians will have to raise their voices on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations”.

But maybe we choose to identify with the “half dead” person in the ditch. Where in our lives are we in need of the stranger or outsider to come to our aid? Have we ever been helped by one considered “outside” our circle? Did that experience do anything to soften our attitudes towards that person’s group? Did it help us put asides our stereotypes? The lawyer in this story is surprised by what he finds himself having to admit: the Samaritan was the neighbor. The Samaritan had compassion. Once we can speak such truths we can be assured the parable has cracked through our customs and even our religious attitudes to help us see God. Perhaps our own family or religion have planted ideas about other people. These judgements of others have damaged us as well. Because of what we were taught, we too have “fallen in with robbers”. We have been victims, damaged and left by the side of the road. Jesus, the Outsider, comes by, sees our wounds and comes to heal us. This parable is the instrument of our healing; it is the oil he pours on our wounded spirits.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

PARABLES FOR PREACHERS: YEAR C, by Barbara E. Reid. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000. Paper, 351 pages, \$11.95.

This excellent commentary on the parables is one of a series of three that addresses the parables as they appear in the liturgical year. Written for preachers, the first part discusses the challenge of preaching parables, methods for interpreting them and provides an overview of Luke’s gospel—the gospel for this liturgical year. Then each parable is analyzed along with suggestions for how to preach from the parable under study. The reviews of this series have been excellent, and preachers can welcome these commentaries as helps in our preaching ministry.

QUOTABLE:

People often puzzle over what motivates a person to act as the Samaritan did. An important clue as to how such an action is possible emerges when we take into

account how the first hearers of Jesus' story would have responded to it. Usually when Christians retell the parable we hear the story as one that advises us to act as the Samaritan did. The point appears to be do good to your neighbor, even if the one in need is a hated enemy. But the original audience for Jesus' story would have been Jews, presumably Galilean peasants. And in the narrative the one to whom the story is directed is a Jewish scholar of the law. No Jew who enters into this story would have identified with the hated Samaritan. The character with whom a lay audience would have identified would be the man victimized by the robbers and left for dead. It is from this "view from the ditch" that the parable invites one to see a hated enemy as the merciful face of God. The parable advances that for some it is only possible to accept this message after having reached the depths of need, having been stripped of all of one's own resources. Accepting godly mercy from one once regarded as a hated enemy opens the wellsprings of compassion so that one may come to regard every person as neighbor and in turn be a doer of mercy across boundaries.

----from PARABLES FOR PREACHERS: YEAR C, pages 117-118.

JUSTICE NOTES

From the Blauvelt Dominican Sisters justice webpage:

We believe that as women of compassion, we are called to use our power to help create an economic system in which the basic needs of all are met. We oppose unjust systems, which cause and sustain poverty, hunger and homelessness. As women of service, we are called to respond to the needs of the poor, particularly in our day, the homeless.

We believe that as women made in the image and likeness of our God, we are called to proclaim our equality in God's creative design. We support those efforts that empower women to a fuller participation in Church and society. We oppose those structures that deny human dignity and minimize the contributions of women.