

July 13 & 14, 2019
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

All Saints Parish, Syracuse
Fr. Fred Daley

Who is My Neighbor?

One of my favorite *Peanuts* quotes is Linus' off-handed remark: "I love mankind... its people I can't stand!"

We can love things in the abstract, but when it comes to loving them in the concrete..., we frequently find reasons for suspending our love. That's exactly the problem Jesus tackles in today's Gospel. It's not difficult to repeat his answer to the lawyer's question:

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" *"Love God and love neighbor."*

The kicker comes when the legal scholar follows his first question with another:

... and who is my neighbor?"

No matter how hard we try we can never get the full shock of Jesus' answer. His story of the "good Samaritan" blows the sandals off his listeners' feet!

For the Jews, as we know, Samaritans were radically impure; politically dangerous and religiously heretical. For generations, Jews were told – even by the great prophets Hosea and Ezekiel – that the Samaritans were not, by any means, "neighbors."

And yet, in Jesus' story, the Samaritan is the hero, not the victim, not the immoral or unlawful evil doer.... An unwelcomed outsider in Jewish territory is so moved by the plight of the poor Jewish man that he thinks nothing of stopping to help – regardless of the cost of time or money.

The other shocking exposé in Jesus' story are the actions of the religious leaders – the priest and the Levite. When the two passed by on the opposite side of the road, they're not just refusing to get involved with a fellow Jew in need, they're actually forced to do so because of their "religious obligations." Functionaries at the Jewish Temple, they're forbidden to touch a dead body or even come in contact with blood - that would make them ritually impure. So in this particular, concrete situation, this particular Jew doesn't fit their theological definition of "neighbor." In fact, he is more a temptation to sin for them, than a concrete occasion to fulfill God's command in the Book of Leviticus to "love your neighbor."

[Now before we get too judgmental here, perhaps we ought to reflect on the more than 600 Canon laws in our own church, regulating who can validly be baptized, married, or receive communion, etc.!]

What Jesus seems to be saying in this story is that if any of us ever find ourselves in dire straits we better pray that an atheist comes by..., "religious persons" would probably have four or five reasons why in this situation they're absolved from helping us! No wonder Jesus ended up on the cross with the blessing of religious officials!

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Sisters and brothers the bottom line of Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan is that if we truly want to be his disciples – we are called to *love every man, woman and child without exception – even our enemies!*

Again that might be easy to accept in the abstract, but is quite a challenge in the concrete — and yet, if the world is ever going to become the world that God intended, and if we – as individuals – are ever to find peace in our hearts or souls... this core value must be upheld.

And we don't have to look very far to see what hatred, rejection and scapegoating is doing to our world, our Nation; perhaps, our families and relationships, at the present moment.

I invite each one of us to reflect on this Gospel story in the concrete: is there a person, are there people... who I am having a hard time loving? ...or have a hard time not hating? Maybe a former friend who deceived me, a coworker, a next-door neighbor ...a former partner... a parent – living or deceased... or in-laws. To the extent that we have experienced hatred we know that it can become a cancer within us that ultimately consumes us. The person may be long gone and yet we let them continue to take away our peace and serenity.

What do we do when we are experiencing hatred towards another?

Now I must be totally honest: I am having a very hard time loving our president... and I don't say this with pride or self-righteousness or humor. It's a struggle that perhaps some of you share... that is difficult to live with on a day-to-day basis.

The spiritual giants tell us it's very important to understand that "loving" someone does not mean condoning their behavior: *...love the sinner, not the sin...* So, I will continue to join with others in confronting the President's immoral policies – as we did on Friday evening at the *Lights for Liberty Vigil* – and: I will vote the next election!

We are powerless over our feelings...; feelings are neither right nor wrong: they just are. But we do have power to refrain from acting on our feelings in a negative, destructive way... in our personal lives and relationships or on a global scale.

The first thing we can do when we're experiencing feelings of hatred is to pray for that person. As difficult as this may seem, *it is something we can all do.*

And, we can pray for the grace to love that person ...Remember: 'loving a person' *does not* mean we have to 'like' the person... we don't have to become 'bosom buddies' ... We can "let go and let God..." – God is bigger than we are. With God's grace I'm not going to let hatred consume me.

Sisters and brothers, this all might seem like a fantasy, like "pie in the sky," – something that's impossible to do. But Moses, in the Book of Deuteronomy, tells us that God's grace is not beyond our strength or beyond our reach. It is not "in the heavens," or "beyond the seas." No... it is very near us, ... it is in our heart; ... it is within us!

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In Jesus' story we have a model: the Scholar of the Law, immersed in the cultural customs and attitudes and restrictions of his time, ... the prejudices and regulations in which he was brought-up, was searching for something more... and, he ultimately looked within himself and... he was converted.

Who is my neighbor?

“The scholar answered: ‘The one who took pity on him’...;

and Jesus said: ‘Go and do likewise.’

Amen.