

Pastoral Message, 2 March 2019

*But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'
(Luke 10:29)*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Many states in the U.S. have, as part of their criminal code, statutes popularly known as 'Good Samaritan laws.' These laws essentially protect bystanders in an emergency setting from being sued or otherwise prosecuted should they attempt to help or give aid to persons in danger. In some states, bystanders are even obliged by law to provide reasonable assistance to those in peril.

Taking their name and moral direction from Jesus' famous parable in the Gospel of Luke, laws of this kind would seem to establish fundamental compassion as a civic duty. We are intimately responsible for each other, they seem to say, be the 'other' a friend or a stranger. At their heart is the desire in promoting the common good and in seeing and valuing the interconnectedness of human lives. 'Any man's death diminishes me,' famously wrote John Donne, 'because I am involved in mankind.'

Such laws, and the spirit behind them, are positive developments, to be sure. But simply doing the caring thing for someone in need does not address the deeper meaning and import of Jesus' parable in Luke. In answering the question, 'Who is my neighbor,' the story of the Good Samaritan becomes inextricably bound to our Lord's teaching on love of one's enemies. Indeed, the real shock effect that this parable no doubt would have caused to Jesus' original audience lies in the fact that the protagonist and hero of the story is a member of a deeply hated minority. Assuming (as we should) that the man he helps is a traditional Jew (who would otherwise have detested his helpers very presence) then the Samaritan's actions are as surprising as they are noble.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, then, is a universal tale of love transcending hatred, of compassion conquering cultural and racial prejudice. Yet this also makes it a moral story specific to our own times, in our nation and throughout the world. At a time when the number of recorded hate crimes in this country is on the rise, when our elected leaders at the highest levels of government seem eager to sow discord and promote fear for political gain, and when tribal divisions of 'us versus them' serve to shape our social discourse, Jesus' picture of uncompromising charity appears all the more valuable. The sight of one human being doing the truly human thing for the sake of a fellow creature is a vision we can and must honor and find hope in as we continue to face the current crisis, and as we work for a better future.

So I hope you'll take the time to join me and others on four Sundays during Lent (beginning this coming Sunday, March 10, after the late Service) as we examine closely this marvelous, timely parable of love and as we discover in ourselves, by grace, the courage to live it fully through our daily lives.

Many Blessings for a Holy Lent!
Fr. Gordon +