

**This Sunday's Readings – the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time** – The Law and the Prophets can be summed up quite simply – love God and love your neighbor.

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, which is the last book of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). Although attributed to Moses, the book of Deuteronomy was first written in book form sometime during the reign of King David. Over the next few hundred years, it went through many modifications. This book is also referred to as the second Law, Exodus being the first. The Law was inspired as a covenant of love between a loving God and the people of Israel. Today's reading is taken from the end of the Book of Deuteronomy and is known as Moses' Last Discourse, just before he died. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column elaborates on this point – “At this point in Deuteronomy, Moses is just four chapters from his death. The sacred author makes these words part of the great Jewish liberator's last will and testament; an aspect of faith he most wants the Chosen People to remember. Trying to ward off the teaching of those who would one day insist that Yahweh's commands revolved only around transporting us from the confines of our everyday world and placing us squarely in the realm of heaven, Moses reminds us we're to work out our salvation against the background of the natural and normal”. As Moses is trying to impress on the people in this reading, the Law is not something that has to be searched for. It is within us. It is in our heart and in our soul. All we have to do is “to carry it out”. Compassion is an expression of that love within us for our neighbor. But, who is my neighbor?

In today's Gospel reading from Luke, we hear probably the most recognized and loved of Jesus' parables – the Good Samaritan. The lawyer asks Jesus “what must I do to attain eternal life”. Jesus responds with a question of His own “what is written in the Law”. The lawyer understands what is written in the Law but does he really understand its meaning. That is why he asks Jesus “who is my neighbor”. Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan. For this parable to be meaningful, you must understand that there was no love lost between Samaritans and Jews. In fact they hated each other. That hatred went back hundreds of years to when Samaria was part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Yet it is a Samaritan who has compassion on the injured robbery victim and helps him recover while the Jewish priest and Levite passed him by. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column explains why the Priest and Levite passed him by – “Hearing today's parable, most of us zero in on the Samaritan's generosity and sacrifice for a complete stranger. Jesus' original audience, brought up to despise heretical Samaritans, likewise would have been impressed by his actions. But they probably focused on the priest and Levite more than we do. Both are liturgical ministers, part of the Jerusalem temple sacrificial system. Their ministry demands a special ritual purity. Among other obligations, neither is permitted to function in his office for a specific period after he comes in contact with blood or touches a dead body. That's why, Jesus tells us, when the priest "saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he also passed by on the opposite side." Though they might have felt pity for the mugged Jew, their lofty position in the worship system stopped them from acting on that pity. Religious obligations trump love obligations”. Note that Jesus never tells us who this victim is. He could have been a Jew, a Samaritan,

or a Gentile. Remember that he was stripped of his clothes and left half dead (most likely unconscious). Either his clothes or his dialect would have identified him. The bottom line here is that the Samaritan had compassion on a fellow human being in dire need and the courage to help him. What a wonderful lesson for all of us. Everyone is our neighbor, even our enemies. Even the lawyer begrudgingly recognizes this, even though he could not say the word “Samaritan”, but only “the one who treated him with mercy”. As Jesus said “Go and do likewise”! What would we do in a similar situation? Would we have the compassion and the courage to help a human being in need?

There are many cultural implications in this Gospel story. John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* helps us understand these implications – “In the Mediterranean world questions are rarely perceived as requests for information. They are almost always viewed with suspicion as a challenge to personal honor. The hope is that the person who is asked a question will not know the answer and be shamed by ignorance. Lest the reader miss the point, Luke explicitly states that the lawyer's intent was to “test” Jesus. In this seven-scene parable, the Samaritan stands at the center:

1. The robbers strip and leave their victim half dead (v. 30). Now, no one can identify the victim's ethnicity by his garments or his accent, two very common ways of identifying a stranger in antiquity. Helping him carries a risk.
2. The priest, riding a donkey in accord with his elite status, notices the victim and ponders. If the victim is dead or is a non-Judean, the priest would be defiled by touching him and have to return to Jerusalem for purification. Those who just saw him gloriously fulfilling his priestly role would now see him returning in shame for purification. The risk is too great. Recalling Sirach 12:1-7, the priest rides on (v. 31).
3. The Levite may have come even closer to examine the victim (v. 32). Even though the road is not straight, the Levite very likely saw the priest's response to the victim from afar. If the priest did not give first aid, why should the Levite? That would be a challenge to the priest, an insult. Moreover, if this victim is one of those who live in Shechem (i.e., a Samaritan), Sirach 50:25-26 reports what God thinks of such. The Levite, too, passes on.
4. The Samaritan is a shocking third character in this story. Listeners would have expected “a Judean layperson.” But this hated enemy is the first to feel compassion (v. 33)! The Hebrew word, related to womb, describes an inner gut-feeling.
5. He offers the first aid (wine, oil, and bandages), which the Levite could have done but neglected to do (v. 34). The Samaritan's risk is that this victim might hate him upon re-gaining consciousness. Samaritan wine and oil were considered impure and would have made the (very likely) Judean victim impure too! In a certain sense, the Samaritan in this story line will be “damned if he does, and damned if he doesn't.”
6. The Samaritan then does what the priest might have done but didn't: he places the victim on his animal, takes him to an inn, and continues to care for him (v. 34)

7. Finally, the Samaritan, in contrast to the robbers, promises to return and pay any additional expenses (v. 35). This is perhaps the most foolish part of this story. If the victim should die, his family, who will not be able to find the robbers, may kill his benefactor instead. Or if the victim survives, he may rage at this Samaritan for making him impure with Samaritan wine and oil. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of purity, that is, the determination to “be holy as the Lord is holy” (Lev 11:44 and elsewhere).

The thrust of the parable is not lost on the lawyer. Now Jesus thrusts the final shaming question: “Which of the three *became a neighbor* to the victim?” The astute lawyer immediately recognizes this new, impending shame. The lawyer's question was: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus' question is: “To whom must you become a neighbor?” The lawyer realizes that one must become a neighbor to anyone and everyone in need. One must reach out with compassion to all people, even to one's enemies. Too often this parable has been read as a pleasant moral lesson of kindness and neighborliness. Fleshing out all the characters in their Mediterranean cultural characteristics gives the parable a fresh look. A hated outsider extends compassionate love to his enemy. What a masterful attack on communal prejudice”!

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