

Brothers and Sisters,

I'm quite certain that this Gospel account that we just read, the parable of the Good Samaritan is one with which we are all quite familiar. It's one of those parables that most of us can recite in some form or another from memory, as we've heard it so many times in our lives. Unfortunately, like many things, our familiarity with this parable at times can make it seem to lose its freshness and its power.

But a parable is a story that cannot have nor does it intend to have its meaning exhausted. There is always something more that we can learn from a parable, some new depth we can unearth. So let's delve into this parable.

Now, of course, the most common reading of this parable is that Jesus made the point that all people are our neighbors, and therefore we would do well to help anyone whom we come across that happens to be in need. And I think most people today tend to agree with this statement and accept it as true, even if we don't always live it out very well. You don't see too many people going around saying that if you were walking down the street and came across someone who had just been mugged and beaten that you should simply turn a blind eye as the priest and Levite did. No, we all know that we need to offer some assistance, even if it's something as simple as calling 911.

The reason we understand that we are to call 911 or help our neighbor is because Christ Himself transmuted the concepts of neighbor and charity as evidenced in this parable. And yet, like things we hear over and over, it is so easy for us to forget how profoundly Christ has changed the world. Prior to Christ, there was not a great concern for victims of violence. In fact, as the French literary scholar and theologian René Girard points out, violence was necessary to mask the evils of society and to preserve order. This is something we tend to forget with our limited historical mind. Many people tend to think that religion is a source of violence and that we need to rid ourselves of religion if we want to create peace. But nothing could be further from the truth, because without religion, or more precisely, without Christianity, the notion that all human life is sacred simply does not exist. The notion that we are to be neighbor to all people never enters into our imagination.

In fact, Girard's studies show that often times what happens is that rather than treating people as neighbor, societies tend to choose a victim, a scapegoat, on whom they can place all their problems. They then violently slaughter the scapegoat as a means to solve their problem, until the problem resurfaces, at which point in time they repeat the cycle of violence by choosing another scapegoat.

One prime example of this can be seen in Greek mythology. Some of you may recall the story of Oedipus Rex. Oedipus became the king of Thebes after solving a riddle posed to him by a sphinx. But what the people of Thebes didn't know was that Oedipus was marked by a curse from his birth. An oracle foretold that he would kill his father and marry his mother. To prevent this from happening his parents abandoned him as an infant, leaving him for dead. Well, the prophecy comes true, and Oedipus ends up killing his father unknowingly, and marrying his mother. When this happens a curse comes upon the people of Thebes. And the people of Thebes rebel against the king, who, without knowing so, had fulfilled the oracle's prophecy. And they violently exiled him.

The reason I mention this story is that it shows the collective violence that was typical of all cultures and all religions prior to Christ. It was a violence that showed no concern for victims. It always sided with the violent mob. The entire story of Oedipus is meant to justify the violence done to Oedipus. His parents seem justified in abandoning him as an infant because of the prophecy. The people of Thebes are seen as having rightly exiled him because he was seen as the source of their plague. Yet in doing this the people tend to act like the priest and Levite who passed by the wounded traveler. There is no concern for the victim, there is no concern for Oedipus. The violence done to him is considered justified.

Now contrast this with our parable today where Christ transforms the notions of neighbor and charity. Our neighbor is the person in need, the victim, the one being scapegoated. Our neighbor is the one lying bloody on the ground. Our neighbor is Oedipus! Now this notion of neighbor would be extremely challenging to anyone hearing this for the first time. For the Jewish people in Jesus' time it was ritually impure for a Jew to have dealings with blood, which is why the priest and Levite kept their distance from this man. See, when we hear this story we tend to think of the priest and Levite as jerks, as people who didn't do what they were supposed to do. Ahh, but they did do what they were supposed to do. It wasn't until Jesus posed the question "which of these three was neighbor?" that the truth became apparent – that our neighbor is the victim whose dignity has been lost.

Even more remarkable still, perhaps is the implicit command in this parable – the demand that we become people who treat everyone we encounter, no matter how frightening, how naked or defenseless they may be, with compassion. Again, this is a concept that was completely foreign prior to Christ. You see, prior to Christ, nations did not rush to assist other nations when they were struck by disasters such as famine, earthquakes, fires and floods. No, such nations were deemed to be accursed. If anything this would be a justification for rival nations to invade and enslave their neighbor.

But Christ changed all that. Because of Christ, a concern for victims lodged itself into the world's conscience. When Haiti and Chile were ravaged by earthquakes, notice that the talk was not about how accursed these people were, how ungodly or sinful they were. Rather, the response was that several nations ran to their aid. There was no international chatter about invading these nations. No, the response was one of compassion and concern for the victims.

Friends, this concern for victims is only possible because Christ has revealed to us that these victims are not scapegoats, but neighbors. He revealed this to us in the parable we heard today, and he certainly revealed this to us on the cross, where he became, in the words of Eucharistic prayer III, the "Victim whose death has reconciled us to [God]." As we prepare to approach the altar, and receive Christ the victim into our own lives, let's be mindful of the many ways in which Christ has transformed our world, and let's allow Him, through His own suffering and resurrection to transform our lives so that we don't ignore those who have been victimized by violence, sin, and untruth. Let's allow Him to transform us so that we may reach out to them as the Samaritan did, and help to restore their dignity, for they are our neighbors.

Brothers and Sisters, Peace to you, and to all who serve their neighbors.