

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
July 14, 2019

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The Parable of the Good Samaritan is well-known and much loved. But be careful! It is also the most *subtle* of all the parables. Many people think the story Jesus told is about charity. It is actually about *humility*.

The clue is found in the preliminary dialogue between the lawyer and the Lord Jesus. Consider that dialogue with the conversation that follows the parable and you arrive at the right understanding of what the Lord was teaching. If you forget the preliminary skirmish and the wrap-up it is very easy to conclude the point of the parable is that your neighbor is the person who needed your help and we are called to be a good neighbor to help those in need.

The Old Testament is silent about the duty a Jew has towards a Gentile in need. The Law says something about saving animals on the Sabbath, but nothing about aiding foreigners on any day! In *Leviticus* the neighbor is always a fellow Israelite. And that was also true for the lawyer who engaged Our Lord in conversation.

Americans of a certain vintage remember the great Depression. There are remembrances of an unemployed stranger being given a meal at the kitchen table or on the back porch. In our own day the myth of self-sufficiency has made an end to the virtue of practical neighborliness. The attitude in the era of the welfare state is that we pay taxes so let the government take care of the needy! So from Old Testament times to our own day there is a need for the Lord's teaching.

But in the Parable of the Good Samaritan the Son of God had something else to say. He was *not* exhorting His listeners to set up a travelers' aid station on the Jericho Road! Remember the opening and closing dialogue which brackets the parable. Jesus approved the lawyer's summary of the Law. The right thing to do is love thy neighbor. But it becomes clear that since the neighbor in the parable is the Good Samaritan (the one who gives help) it follows that love of neighbor means *to love the one who gives help*. Let that thought sink in!

Imagine the total amazement in the Jewish victim when he realized the hated Samaritan had saved him. Imagine the consequent struggle in the Jew's mind as he searched for a new category for this experience, and a new definition of neighbor.

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His Hebrew school training couldn't help him now! Then imagine also the struggle in the Samaritan, who had to overcome a strong temptation to laugh at the predicament of his enemy the Jew. The Samaritan had to overcome that racial and national temptation in order to kneel down and give aid. In his case also, love was being stretched across old boundaries, and gaining new force. In your own experience there may be a time when you had made up your mind about a kid in the 2nd grade who rubbed you the wrong way and you didn't like him at all. Then one day he did you a good turn. OK, so you changed your mind about one person. But Our Lord directs us to change our whole assessment category.

There's a funny thing about love. It gathers power by being *opposed*. It gains against obstacles if it perseveres. All the great love stories in literature have this theme. There are hurdles to straddle. Many years ago we heard a *Romeo and Juliet* double-bill at *Tanglewood*. Two different composers had two different approaches. Yet the struggle and heartache of the love story came through in both musical scores. *Love gains by having to sacrifice*. And all great love stories are a reflection of the Divine Love revealed perfectly by Christ on the Cross. So the purpose of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is not to show the beauty of generosity but of *humility*. It shows the great gain of love that could change the lives of these two men and of the lawyer who asked the question.

The parable does not encourage us to set up a travelers' aid station on Boylston Street! The Lord knows such efforts are necessary. But such programs are just that. *Programs*. They easily keep love impersonal and hidden behind forms to be filled out in triplicate! Charitable programs also often lead to pride and, ironically, complacency.

Drink in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We are called to approach spiritually wounded souls with the wine and oil of gentleness and an unselfish willingness to walk while they ride. This is the humility of Christ's way, and it is the way He would teach us. Humility is contagious. It can infect those who are wounded. They can love the caregiver. That is the way we bring suffering souls to the inn and hospital of Christ and His Church.