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Loving Means Acting Like the Good Samaritan

Biblical Reflection for 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JULY 6, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- The story of the Good Samaritan in today's Gospel (Luke 10:25-37) is one of the most treasured parables of the Bible. During my studies in the Holy Land, no matter how many times I traveled that perilous yet spectacular highway from Jerusalem to Jericho, I always found myself musing on Luke's provocative story.

Luke's story is powerful, for it speaks of the power of love that transcends all creeds and cultures and "creates" a neighbor out of a complete stranger. The parable is personal, for it describes with profound simplicity the birth of a human relationship that has a personal, physical touch, transcending social and cultural taboos, as one person binds the wounds of another. The parable is a pastoral one, for it is filled with the mystery of care and concern that is at the heart of what is best in human beings. The story is primarily practical, for it urges us to cross all barriers of culture and community and to go and do likewise!

Let us look closely at Luke's parable. The legal expert who responds to Jesus' counter-question is certainly a good and upright man. The words, "wished to justify himself" may often be understood to mean that the lawyer was looking for some loophole to demonstrate his worthiness. In fact, the lawyer wishes to be sure that he understands just what "love your neighbor" really implies. In response to a question from this Jewish legal expert about inheriting eternal life, Jesus illustrates the superiority of love over legalism through the parable.

The priest and Levite (vv 31-32) are religious representatives of Judaism who would have been expected to be models of "neighbor" to the victim they would pass by on the road. Levites were expected to have a special dedication to the law. The identity of the "neighbor" requested by the legal expert turns out to be a Samaritan, the enemy of the Jew. Samaritans were hated by the lawyer's racial group. In the end, the lawyer is even unable to say that it was the Samaritan who showed compassion. He resorts to the description, "The one who treated him with compassion."

Spectator sport

To show compassion is to suffer with the wounded and the suffering, to share their pain and agony. Compassion does not leave us indifferent or insensitive to another's pain but calls for solidarity with the suffering. This is how Jesus, the Good Samaritan par excellence, showed compassion. At times we can be like the priest and the scribe who, on seeing the wounded man, passed by on the other side. We can be silent spectators afraid to involve ourselves and dirty our hands.

Compassion demands that we get out of ourselves as we reach out to others in need. It means that we get our hands and even our reputations dirty. Indifference is worse than hostility. The hostile person at least acknowledges the presence of the other while reacting violently to it; the indifferent person, on the other hand, ignores the other and treats him as if he did not exist. That was the kind of indifference and insensitivity

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shown by the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side, leaving the wounded and waylaid traveler completely alone.

The Good Samaritan shows us what compassion and commitment are all about. He could have easily passed by on the other side. He could have closed his heart and refused to respond to a genuine need. But he stopped and knelt down beside the stranger who was hurting. At that moment, a neighbor was born. Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan. This stopping and stooping, this pausing and kneeling down beside the suffering, is not done out of curiosity but out of love. The Samaritan's compassion brings him to perform a whole series of actions. First he bandaged his wounds, then he took the wounded man to an inn to care for him, and before leaving, he gives the innkeeper the necessary money to take care of him (vv 34-35).

Loving means acting like the Good Samaritan. We know that Jesus himself is the Good Samaritan par excellence; although he was God, he did not hesitate to humble himself to the point of becoming a man and giving his life for us. More than 2,000 years after this story was first told, it continues to move people deeply. It teaches us what authentic compassion, commitment and communion with others are all about.

Concept of neighbor

In his 2005 encyclical letter "Deus Caritas Est" (On Christian Love), Benedict XVI wrote in #15: "The parable of the Good Samaritan offers two particularly important clarifications. Until that time, the concept of 'neighbor' was understood as referring essentially to one's countrymen and to foreigners who had settled in the land of Israel; in other words, to the closely-knit community of a single country or people. This limit is now abolished. Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor. The concept of 'neighbor' is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now.

"The Church has the duty to interpret ever anew this relationship between near and far with regard to the actual daily life of her members. Lastly, we should especially mention the great parable of the Last Judgment (cf. Matthew 25:31-46), in which love becomes the criterion for the definitive decision about a human life's worth or lack thereof. Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God."

A good knight

When I reflect on the ways that this parable has taken on flesh in history, I cannot help but think of the Venerable Servant of God, Father Michael McGivney, a parish priest who lived in 19th century America. He ministered to his flock with Christ-like compassion. Father McGivney recognized the material and spiritual poverty of so many members of the Catholic community of his day, and he understood that it was part of the lay vocation to become actively involved in offering assistance to brothers and sisters in need. He knew that it is not only priests and religious who have a vocation, but that every Christian is called by Christ to carry out a particular mission in the Church. He left a lasting legacy in founding and establishing the Knights of Columbus, a lay Catholic fraternal organization, that now has close to 1.8 million members worldwide (www.kofc.org). On Aug. 14, 1890, Father McGivney, a priest of the Diocese of Hartford (USA) died at the young age of 38 years old.

The Knights of Columbus are nothing more than the continuation of the parable of the Good Samaritan in history. This fraternal order specializes in preparing other Good Samaritans for our time. Like the Good Samaritan, Christ's care for the sick and the suffering was an inspiration to Father McGivney who, as a priest,

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sought to be a living sign of Christ for the people he served.

Father McGivney and his brother Knights throughout history have been binding the wounds of those they discovered lying by the wayside of history and helping restore them to health and strength. In so doing, they imitate Christ, who came that we might have life in abundance.

"Nowhere is the face of our Church more attractive than in our open embrace of our neighbor," Supreme Knight Carl Anderson recently wrote. "Each encounter with those in need is actually an opportunity to create a civilization of love, one person, one act at a time."

Prayer for canonization

Many readers of this weekly column live in parts of the world where Knights are not present. Yet to simply know of their existence in the Church and in the world is cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving. They give flesh and blood to today's wonderful Gospel story. I encourage you to pray to Father McGivney and ask him to help you become a Good Samaritan to those around you. Pray for the courage to reach out beyond boundaries, the boldness to get your hands dirty as you touch the outcast, and the grace and consolation to recognize the face of Jesus in those to whom you minister.

"God, our Father, protector of the poor and defender of the widow and orphan, you called your priest, Father Michael J. McGivney, to be an apostle of Christian family life and to lead the young to the generous service of their neighbor.

"Through the example of his life and virtue may we follow your Son, Jesus Christ, more closely, fulfilling his commandment of charity and building up his Body, which is the Church. Let the inspiration of your servant prompt us to greater confidence in your love so that we may continue his work of caring for the needy and the outcast.

"We humbly ask that you glorify your servant Father Michael J. McGivney on earth according to the design of your holy will.

"Through his intercession, grant the favor I now present (here make your request).

"Through Christ our Lord. Amen."

[The readings for 14th Sunday of Ordinary Time are Deuteronomy 30:10-14; Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 10:25-37]

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