

**Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C  
(July 11, 2010)**

**Saint Luke**

The Good Samaritan. How often have we heard the story? We could all recite it from memory, couldn't we? And of course we all know the lesson: my neighbor is everyone. There is no one from whom I am to keep my love; but most of all my neighbor is the one who is in need.

Well, let's consider it once more and see if we can learn still more, Luke tells us the lawyer wants to test Jesus – maybe even to trick him in some way – just to see how much he really knows about the law.

But Jesus was smarter than the lawyer thought. He turns the question back on the lawyer. After all as a lawyer he is supposed to know the law – so he really did not have to ask the question in the first place. And he gives the answer we know so well. Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself.

But the lawyer will not give up. Once again he tries to put Jesus on the spot.

What happens from here on is a total surprise to the lawyer. Neighbor was a concept also defined by the law. And he simply expected Jesus to give the legal answer: someone in my town, in my tribe, in my family – at most another Israelite. Period. But Jesus asks him to think outside his accustomed categories – and this is the important thing that is happening here. To all of us as well as to the lawyer he says, "Broaden your horizons; expand your vision; take off the blinders and see the whole world. That's where you will find your neighbor – not just in your family, not just next door, but even as far away as the other side of the world." If Jesus were telling the story today, the hero would probably be the Good Palestinian. In Catholic churches in Northern Ireland today the hero would be the Good Protestant and in Protestant churches it would be the Good Catholic.

But what about us? Each one of us should spend some time today retelling this story in a contemporary way with himself or herself in the role of the lawyer. Who would be the ones passing by? A priest, perhaps?

Maybe even a bishop? Some public official? A member of Congress? Maybe even ourselves? And who would be the Good Samaritan? The last person in the world we would expect to think of as our neighbor and someone to whom we owed our love.

Think Fidel Castro! Think Hugo Chavez? Think the unthinkable: Osama Bin Laden?

Unthinkable? Ah, but that is exactly what the lawyer would have felt about the Samaritan.

At the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI expressed the desire and the hope that the church of the future would be the church of the Good Samaritan. By that, of course he meant a church that was open, a church that was inclusive, not exclusive, a church that was compassionate, willing to take a chance at times, willing to step outside its conventional categories and customary ways of proceeding, willing even to suspend its own legalities if the demands of love required it.

We can learn a great deal about living as God wants us to live from this story. First of all, what is love? Love is not simply an abstract term, nor is it a romantic notion or a good feeling. It's much more than that. Love is as concrete, distasteful, and expensive as picking up a beaten, naked man off the street and nursing him back to health.

Then, just as important is our way of acting Jesus tells us three things about the Samaritan. He sees; he feels; and he acts. He sees a naked man, bleeding and dying by the wayside. Perhaps he also sees the priest and Levite pass by.

The priest and Levite are limited by the way they see life. Perhaps they stand as an indictment of the culture they live in and perhaps as an indictment of our culture as well. But seeing the naked, bleeding man, the Samaritan feels compassion. The way Jesus feels compassion for people who suffer, for people who are hungry, who are confused and wandering, like sheep without a shepherd, even for people who are dead and their grieving parents or relatives. Think of the daughter of Jairus, of the widow's son, of Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary. And then the Samaritan acts. Most importantly he acts. Compassion is not enough. I can see pictures of starving children in Africa or Asia or the slums of our cities. I can be horrified by violence in Latin America or the Middle East or

on the streets of Washington, D.C., and I can feel compassion for all of them. But that is not enough. I must act. And like the Samaritan I may find my actions costly in time, in effort, and in convenience. But Jesus says to the lawyer, "Now, you go and do the same thing." And he says that to us as well. It takes a lot of faith, a lot of courage, a lot of conviction. But, you know, it's only when we are willing to do what Jesus suggests: to see reality as it is, to feel compassion, and to do what we can to help the situation that we will even begin to understand what the Gospels are all about, what God is calling us all to do: a ministry of love and service.

Really what we are being asked to do is act like Jesus and to be Good Samaritans, not in any showoff way but just because it is the right thing to do. Remember the shocking incident a few years ago: the plane that crashed in the Potomac River in the winter. Remember the young man who was on the bridge, saw it happen, and jumped into the freezing water to help people who were drowning? He risked his own life to help others whose lives were at risk. I heard him interviewed later on the news. When asked how it felt to be a hero, he said. "'I'm not a hero. I just saw people in trouble and I wanted to help them.'" That's what it means to be a Good Samaritan. Can we hear Jesus say to each and every one of us: "Now you go and do likewise."

All of us are here tonight because in one sense or another we have acted like the Good Samaritan. We have seen. We have felt. We have acted. We have seen the suffering of our friends. We have felt compassion and we have been moved to action. With God's help we will continue to do so.

We pray in a special way tonight for those who suffer from HIV/AIDS, for their caregivers, their families and friends. It probably will sound strange for me to say this, but it seems to me that in a way we owe those who suffer a debt of gratitude because they give us the opportunity not only to love our neighbor as ourselves but also to grow, to grow as a compassionate people, to be the people God wants us to be, and to act like the Good Samaritan.