

Fifteenth Sunday of the Year (C) – July 14, 2019

If you wanted to live a comfortable, straightforward life, without challenge or confrontation then don't ask Jesus a question because every time someone does in the Gospels he takes their lives, our lives, in a completely new direction and opens us up to possibilities that take us beyond our comfort zones or narrow way of thinking and acting, opening our hearts and minds to God's crazy love, boundless mercy, and unquenchable justice. This happened when a young man asked him what he had to do to inherit eternal life and Jesus responded by inviting him to give up all his possessions (he was a young man with great wealth) and then come follow him. The young man went away sad because he simply could not do it, could not take that risk, his attachment to material things had control over him and he could not let go, at least not at this moment in his life. Too much risk, a challenge he simply could not rise too. And in today's Gospel, Jesus is asked another question 'Who is my neighbor?' And I bet the person who asked it wished they had kept their mouth shut, because Jesus is going to widen their vision and horizon as to who their neighbor actually is. And Jesus loved to stir the crowd, because the one who proves to be a neighbor is someone his own kin, his own people, had no time for: Samaritans! There was great animosity between Samaritans and Jews; so Jesus is stirring the pot, stirring his listeners, setting himself up to be challenged, rejected, hounded out of town.

Why did Jesus do this? Why did he have to stir the fires of animosity between Jew and Samaritan, and make the good guy in the story someone his audience despised and had no time for? Because God has come among us in Jesus Christ to blow our hearts wide open so that they beat in tune with His. God has twenty, twenty vision so there are no blind spots. We hide behind the blind spots of prejudice, fear and division. As we know, the Gospel stories each Sunday, more often than not, follow on from the previous one. A couple of weeks ago the apostles, disciples, were more than unhappy that the Samaritans did not welcome Jesus into their town because he was heading to Jerusalem, to the holy city of the Jews, the people they had no time for and who had no time for them. The apostles encourage Jesus to rain down fire upon them, but Jesus reprimands them for even thinking in such a way. Had they missed his Sermon on the Mount, and not heard him when he said that the days of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, the days of retribution are over? Obviously not! Retribution creates more hostility and division, and it is simply not the way of God. Retribution always makes matter worse, we can see that in personal relationships, and when it is played out on the national and international stage. It gets you nowhere but simply affirms, extends and deepens the hatred that exists.

So obviously knowing and experiencing the division between these two cultures, Jesus makes the good guy the Samaritan and the bad guys their very own leaders, priests and Levites, who simply cross over to the other side in order to avoid the person who obviously needs their immediate help. The Samaritan is not only a vehicle of mercy but also of justice. He is not only concerned with bandaging the beaten man's physical wounds, responding to his basic needs, but also to his long term needs as well. This is a man of mercy and justice. Mercy responds to immediate need (I would declare that as disciples of Jesus Christ we are all good at responding to an immediate need), but justice takes it that step further, and asks what do we have to do to make sure this person receives long term care, to not only get them back on their feet but to give them hope and security for the future?

Helder Camara, an Archbishop in Brazil from 1964 till 1985, once declared: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." As Christians, disciples of Jesus Christ, we are never afraid to ask the deeper questions, we don't just want to dress the wounds, we are interested in finding solutions and answers to the deeper issues and problems. We have hearts of mercy and minds of justice! Jesus was never afraid to step into peoples lives no matter who they were or what reputation they had. He widened, by his own words and actions, the whole concept of neighbor. Jesus, as we see in countless Gospels stories, was never afraid to venture into the lives of the so called unredeemed and unworthy, he was there in the midst of them, hence the reason he had the reputation of "being a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Jesus was labelled, judge, condemned for opening the door of God's love and redemption to everyone. "He could walk with sinners, eat with them, embrace them, forgive their sins, feel the pain and chaos of sin, yet not sin himself. He could challenge the world, even as he blessed and enjoyed its energies" (Ronald Rolheiser).

I wonder if the person who asked the question "Who is my neighbor?" regretted doing so, because the true neighbor is someone they certainly would not have chosen to live next door to, one who was considered to be irreligious because they lived outside the Law. We tend to label people, I know I do. When I was growing up in the UK, and at seminary, the Northern Ireland troubles were at their height. Bombings were occurring on a fairly regular basis not only in Northern Ireland but also on the mainland. I was in the center of Birmingham in the UK the night of a series of pub bombings, which we could easily have been caught up in. The Deacons at our seminary actually came and rescued us in the college cars.

More often than not it was the Provisional IRA who were behind the bombings, used in protest of British occupation in Northern Ireland with the hope, desire, of uniting the North to the South. And because they were Irish and Catholic in name, all Irish people living on the mainland and Catholics in general became targets of suspicion. If you said you were a Catholic, and Irish, the response was often: "So you support the IRA?" And once you are given a label it is hard to remove it, to remove the prejudice, discrimination and even hatred that can go with it.

We judge without knowledge, thinking everyone is the same without even knowing who they really are. In making a Samaritan the true neighbor, Jesus is removing the labels that were attached to him because of prejudice and religious differences. Surely no one wants to be known by a label that others have given them out of discrimination, prejudice, bad blood or history. Our true identity comes from the goodness that flows through our hearts and responds to the needs of others, identifying with the person (no matter who they are) who needs our help. In asking the question "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus has certainly given us a very clear answer. Amen!