

Our Gospel story is one of the most familiar stories in our Bible and even though the word “good” shows up nowhere in the story; we all know this parable as the story of the Good Samaritan. We simply say the title and we can immediately envision the entire story unfolding. This story is so familiar to us that we have “Good Samaritan laws” that protect those who attempt to render aid from civil law suits. And I’m willing to bet that each of us have our own story of either witnessing someone being a “good Samaritan” or being a good Samaritan ourselves. This story is foundational in our formation as Christians or even as people of good will. There’s more to the story, of course, than simply providing aid to one in desperate need.

The timing of this reading in our liturgical cycle couldn’t be better given the terrible events of this last week. Perhaps the Gospel can give us a lens in which to view the killings and shootings of police in Dallas, and of Philandro Castile and Alton Sterling. Maybe this Gospel and these events can help us confront the lingering legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and the politics of fear.

The two characters who capture my attention this morning are the Priest and the Levite. In today’s terms, they might be analogous to a bishop and a priest. These are people who are thought to be especially

close to God and who desire with all their being to be close to God. Like the lawyer questioning and testing Jesus, they more than anyone else could be expected to know the commandments to love God and love neighbor. Is it too much to ask them to live these commandments out?

Let's speculate what these men of God might have been thinking, not to excuse their behavior but to explain it. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was known to be very dangerous. It made an ideal breeding ground for criminal behavior. Bandits and robbers were known to hang out here. It may have been well known that you take your life into your hands when you travel this road. So maybe the priest and Levite thought that the man in the ditch was a trap and that the bandits were still hanging about – best to move away from danger.

This is understandable when you think about it. Every woman driving solo is taught to NOT stop for a disabled vehicle at the side of the road. This is a well-known gambit for would-be rapists and potential serial murderers. For a single woman, the better part of valor is to simply call the police and report what she has seen. This is called prudent behavior. Additionally, every first responder is trained that the individual responder's safety is paramount – there is no desire to dispatch another unit because the responder put him or herself in

harm's way, impeding the rescue or treatment of the initial victim. So maybe the Priest and the Levite responded prudently to the perceived danger or threat.

Perhaps the issue is one of ritual purity. To touch blood or to bleed is to become ritually unclean. Maybe the Priest and Levite were on their way to perform some official function where their state of ritual purity mattered.

Notice, however, that the Samaritan was not troubled by these worries for his personal safety. He, too, had the book of Leviticus as part of his Scripture so shared concerns about ritual purity. His first thoughts were for the man who had been stripped of his clothes and his dignity, and was badly injured. From his own resources, he treated the man, saw to his recovery, and spent a princely sum for his continued care. All this for a man the Samaritan would have considered an enemy. Certainly the Samaritan would have been considered an enemy of Jews and perhaps his ministrations would be unwelcome to the poor man in the ditch.

To give you a better sense of how much dislike the Samaritans and Jews had for one another, picture yourself as the victim in this story. Who would be the most unlikely person to help you out? Who do you

despise so much you'd rather die than be helped by such a person? In answering this question for myself, I was surprised to discover that there are people I feel this way about – members of Westboro Baptist Church. These are the folks who carry “God hates fags” signs at military funerals, among others. These are people I consider bigots and we do not share the same understanding about what it means to be a Christian. My very flesh crawls thinking about one of them touching me. I could not let myself be vulnerable with them, so yes, I would rather die than risk that a member of that church was actually looking after me. Part of what this tells me is that I need to pray for them and change my heart toward them. This also tells me that this is the type of dislike between the Samaritans and the Jews: generational, taught, stereotypical and inherent in the culture.

So why did Jesus use such a person as the hero of the story?

Certainly the shock value helps drive the point of the story home. Recall that the initial question had to do with “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” as if we have ultimate control over whether we live or die. The lawyer who asked this question had followed the law all of his life. It would appear that he thought he would gain eternal life by simply being obedient to the law, rather than seeing the law as a way to be in

relationship with God. The lawyer, the priest and the Levite were inwardly focused. Their goal was about self preservation and lacked understanding that when our desires are focused on God, are focused on love, that's when we open ourselves up to eternal life.

The essential characteristic that the Samaritan shows is mercy. In Luke's Gospel, this is God's characteristic. Another word for mercy is kindness. We are all the beaten, robbed, injured person in the ditch. God gives his mercy, his kindness to each of us. God is near to each of us and it is his nearness, and our willingness to draw near that we know each other. It is also the way we get to know our neighbor.

We are all also the lawyer, the priest and the Levite. Whether we are aware of it, we are all acted upon by our culture. Within our culture, there are those whom we value more than others: those who have resources, who are young, who are male and who are white. When we possess these qualities, it is easy to simply enjoy the privilege that comes with status and to miss what our privilege costs others.

Those of us who have employment have little to no idea what it's like to be considered uninformed or lacking in insight and wisdom simply because we've retired or are out of work. Those of us who are relatively young have little to no idea what it's like to be ignored while

waiting for a table at a restaurant just because we are elderly. Those of us who can move with ease have little to no idea what its like to have to use a wheelchair and the number of obstacles present just to get from one place to another. And those of us who are white tend to be blissfully unaware of being followed whenever we go shopping, of traffic stops because of our appearance, of being perceived to be criminals or poor or uneducated just because of the color of our skin. Our perceptions blind us to knowing our neighbor. If you'd like to get a sense of what your own biases might be I invite you to take an on-line test at implicit.harvard.edu.

To the extent that we are willing to uncover our biases, confront them and resolve to do something about them for the sake of the people for whom we have unconscious prejudices, we move away from being the lawyer, the Levite and the priest and toward becoming like the Samaritan, of living like God intends us to live. We move from a partial life into the fullness of ever lasting life. Our focus moves from ourselves to the other; we "walk a mile in the other man's shoes." As Christians let us cultivate mercy and kindness, rooted in God's love for us. Let's see if in so doing, we combat the forces of evil in the form of fear of the other. Let's make a conscious effort to get to know people we would not

ordinarily meet, and make them truly our neighbor. Little by little, one person at a time, we demonstrate the love of God and we prevent the next Alton Sterling and Philandro Castile from being shot and killed; and we prevent retaliatory shootings. From my lips to God's ears.

AMEN.