

Proper 10, Year C
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Saint Ann's, Old Lyme

May what is spoken here, and what is heard,
be spoken and heard
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was only two weeks into my very first semester at seminary,
that I was looking right down the barrel of the first (of many) exams.
That first test of our learning was what we learned to call a 'content quiz',
and it covered - in daunting detail -
the first two books of the Bible, Genesis and Exodus.

By way of coaching, the professor urged us (and I'm quoting here):
"read Genesis and Exodus as though you've never read them before,
unless, of course, you never have read them before".
So off we went, to read every word of Genesis and Exodus.

Over the course of three years in seminary,
it's fair to say that I read every word
not only of those first two books of the Old Testament,
but every word of the whole Bible.
And I continue to keep my nose in that great book day after day.

Even so, it often happens as I read Holy Scripture that I'm surprised -
surprised to encounter something
either that I've simply never noticed,
or that I've just plain missed.
And that's what happened with today's Gospel reading.

Now, it's not as though I've never heard the story of the Good Samaritan.
It is, after all, one of the old reliables from Sunday School, right?

But I think there's always a danger for us,
especially with a story we've heard a bajillion times before,
that we stop being alert for what we may have missed before.
We may be missing some really good stuff.

What I'd missed before in the story of the Good Samaritan
is that the person who launches the entire episode
is a lawyer.

“A lawyer”, the story begins, “stood up to test Jesus.

At one level, it does my heart good to know
that our generation wasn't the first to see lawyers
as somewhat questionable characters.

We didn't invent lawyer-bashing.

But I admit that I also react a bit defensively,
since my father was a lawyer.

Lawyering housed me, fed me, clothed me,
and gave me a shot at a first class education.

Still, it was a detail I'd missed in the story of the Good Samaritan,
that it was a lawyer who started the whole conversation
and got the ball rolling.

‘Teacher,’ the lawyer asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”.

When the lawyer asked Jesus
what he must do to inherit eternal life,
Jesus asked him: ‘well, you're a lawyer, what does the law say?’.

Isn't it comforting to know
that Jesus had such a delightful sense of humor?!

I've often said that if God doesn't have a good sense of humor,
then I'm likely to spend all of eternity in a very hot place.

Still, I expect that Jesus was perfectly serious
when he answered the lawyer's question
with a few questions of his own.

‘What I must do to inherit eternal life’?

To which Jesus replied:

‘What does the law say?’

And then, when the lawyer asked ‘and just who is my neighbor?’
Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan,
and then asked yet another question:
who is a neighbor

to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers.

Why do you suppose Jesus asked two questions
to which the lawyer already knew the answers?

Surely not to be patronizing;
that wasn't Jesus' style.

Nor, I'm convinced did Jesus simply want to make the lawyer look like a dolt
and thus initiate and bless for all time
the fine sport of lawyer-bashing.

My guess is that Jesus was eager for that lawyer - and for us -
to know that many of the answers to life's really important questions
already do lie - by God's grace - within us.

The Word, as we just heard from Moses, is very near to us -
in our mouths and in our hearts.

Something else I had missed in this wonderful and familiar story
are a few details that aren't mentioned.

For one thing, the victim's name is never mentioned.
The Good Samaritan got the poor fellow to safety
and paid for his care,
but he did all that without – at least as far as we can tell –
without even knowing who the person was.

Another detail absent from the story:
the Good Samaritan didn't tell the innkeeper
how to take care of the victim.

Nor do we have any evidence
that he tried to exert any control over the victim's life,
once he was restored to health.

As far as we are told -
the Good Samaritan didn't hang around
to make sure he received a proper thank-you.

It's fair to say, from what we hear,
that the Good Samaritan didn't try to 'micro-manage' the situation.

Nor did Jesus.

We're never told, are we, what happened to that lawyer.
The last thing we hear
is Jesus' telling him to 'go and do likewise',
but as far as we know,
Jesus didn't hunt him down and make sure he did.

Surely that tells us something about God;
actually it tells us a lot about God.
It speaks volumes about the God
who doesn't browbeat us
or take away our freedom to make choices in life.
God does not put us on a short leash of forced obedience.

What God has done instead is:
- offer us a model - Jesus Christ,
- invite us to emulate that model,
- and make the model Himself our gate to eternal life.

God's hope for us, clearly, is that we will emulate Christ
and in the doing will point the way for others, too.
'Go and do likewise,' Jesus tells us.

The reason God wants us to do likewise, I am convinced,
is not to buy God's favor, which we can't do anyway,
or to earn our own salvation, which we can't do either,
or even to make God's life better, which we could never do.

But what happens when we 'go and do likewise' – as best as we can -
is not only that it makes the world better
by establishing mercy and justice in our dealings with one another,
whether those neighbors are in Idaho or Iraq
or Old Lyme or New Rochelle.
It also – somehow - makes our lives better, too.

And when we go and do likewise –
when the world is a better place for all of us is when we discover
that the Word is very near us,
because that's when we invite God's Kingdom to come very near.

The questions for us who are followers of Jesus Christ

is not only who our neighbor is -
it's everyone – especially the one who is needy.
But another question is:
what kind of behavior is fitting for us disciples of Jesus.

And what Jesus, in this story, has done
is to say 'no' to conduct grounded in the ethic of the law -
which seeks always to set rigid limits.
Instead, Jesus says 'yes' to the ethic of love,
- refuses to put any limits on the obligations of love,
- and tells us to 'go and do likewise'.

There's yet another not-to-be-missed detail in this familiar and beloved story.
We know that the lawyer didn't approach Jesus
because he much cared about the answer to the question
about what he must do to inherit eternal life.

He stood up, we are told, 'to *test* Jesus'.

Even so, Jesus answered him.

Even to the likes of lawyers,
Jesus offers eternal life!
As Moses said to the Israelites,
God delights in prospering us -
all of us - even lawyers.

And Jesus lived and died and rose that it should be so for all of us.

Thanks be to God!

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