

**“The Compassionate Samaritan”**

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

When an expert in religious law asked Jesus a question, it really was a test. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asked the lawyer what he thought, and the man gave the stock answer of the day, quoting the Shema, a very important Hebrew text. “Hear, O Israel,” it says, “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Then he added from Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” When Jesus told him he had answered well, the man continued the test: “So just who is my neighbour?” he asked. And Jesus told a story. For someone to be robbed going down the road between Jerusalem and Jericho is like saying somebody was mugged in New York yesterday. It’s not really news. Jesus described the horrible aftermath of the robbery – the victim was left half dead, beaten, and stripped.

A priest happened by, and I know you know the story, most of it, and when he saw the man, he went around him, avoiding any contact. Why?

It helps to know that the man may have appeared dead or near death. If a priest were to touch a dead person or if the victim died while the priest assisted him, the priest would have become defiled, “unclean,” according to Jewish law, and this prohibited him from fulfilling his priestly duties for a time. Perhaps the priest was simply afraid the robbers might still be around. However, as Jesus’ listeners heard the story, they would think that the priest should have given those reasonable excuses up and just helped the guy. The common folk weren’t always all that keen on priests, anyway, still aren’t, by the way, imagining that priests or pastors sometimes thought more highly of themselves than they ought.

The story continues with a Levite, who acted in just the same way as the priest. Levites served the temple community in many ways, from musicians to custodians to those who examined animals who were to be sacrificed. Again, we don’t know his internal motivations, but he also would have been rendered unclean by contact with a dead person and unable to perform his job. Was it the defilement he feared, or something else? Who knows?

The third passerby in Jesus’ story was a person no one expected. He was a Samaritan. It is almost impossible for us today, to understand the tension and dislike between Jews and Samaritans of the first century. Jesus saw Samaritans as racially impure, deeply flawed in their religious understanding and unclean. Samaritan, he likely would have refused the aid. Imagine that! I’m dying but don’t help me.

However, to the gasps of Jesus’ audience, the Samaritan is the one who administered aid. He poured his own wine to cleanse the man’s wounds and his own oil to soothe them. He got dirty and messy with his helping, and he even spent his own money at the inn, leaving enough for the man to stay there a couple of weeks. Frankly, love had its way.

Now it has always fascinated me. When Jesus turned back to the lawyer who had asked the original question and said, “Who was the neighbour to the man who was hurt?” it must have galled the lawyer to say, “The one who showed him mercy.” He was unable to say the word “Samaritan.”

Interestingly, Jesus never told the end of the story. Did the victim recover? Did he find out who had helped him? What became of the Samaritan?

In one sense, the answers to these questions really do not matter. The man who gave aid simply did what a person should do. He acted. He didn’t just pass on by. Whether the victim survived or not, this man had done the right thing.

Mother Teresa said that her goal on the streets of Calcutta was to see that no one died unloved and alone. She was not able to save most of the lives of the dying, because the people were so sick when she and her sisters found them. But they could give them a clean bed, a loving touch, and whatever comfort they could. We cannot always undo the effects of evil, but we can at least see that evil does not have the last word.

Now let me tell you a story. Over twenty years ago, I helped our youth group advisor, Lynn Perrin, of what was then the St. James Parish of Mannheim and New Dundee chaperone 18 young people of the parish to Toronto for a day of sightseeing. All but one had never been on a subway so we went to the end of the Bloor Street line, got out at Yonge Street, and we took them on a walking tour down to and in and around the Chinatown, City Hall, Eaton Centre. I spent my day at the back of the pack, counting over and over to 18, making sure nobody was lost. Knowing Toronto quite well, these young people nor Lynn for that matter didn't and these country and small town kids, very sheltered kids, were amazed by the number of people living on the streets. These young people were also quite moved by these people.

"Why don't they have jobs?" they would ask. "Where do they live? What should we do when they ask us for money?"

"Just keep walking," I said. Fine Christian example from the pastor. "There's no way we can help them all. Just look straight ahead and keep walking."

But they were unable to do that. They had never seen street people in such numbers and they looked at each one. They made eye contact. Something in those young, unhardened souls was moved by the economic and spiritual poverty they saw. One girl asked me, "Would it be okay if I gave my lunch to that man over there? He asked for food." We were going to eat outside at Nathan Phillips Square. What could I say? "It's your lunch," I said. "But are you sure that's what you want to do with it?" Immediately, she walked over to him, and with great respect asked him if he would like a sandwich and an apple. He nodded and reached out for it. I never saw such a look as the one on her face as she walked away, shyly glancing back to see the man hungrily eating the sandwich.

One by one, the lunches changed hands, until 18 lunches had been given away. Make that 20. Lynn, the youth group advisor and I gave ours away, too. How could we not? It wasn't that we felt guilty. It was that we saw such joy in the giving of those youth that we knew we wanted to be part of it.

Though we had enough money, no one bought lunch that day – at least until 3 PM, it was an early supper. They said they were saving their money for souvenirs, but I was pretty sure these young people wanted to feel what it was like to miss a meal, just once.

Friends, I learned much from them that day. We didn't get anyone out of homelessness. We didn't change the city of Toronto. We probably didn't even make much of a difference in the lives of the people who ate our lunches. However, I can say with certainty that there was a difference in us. That night, as we debriefed and reflected on the day, we talked about homelessness in a new way. We were not suddenly experts, but we had seen it close-up and we had been moved by what we saw. We imagined going hungry for days at a time. We wondered what it would be like to have to beg for money and food, and to be at the mercy of the elements living on the streets.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Those young people taught me that sometimes God calls us to do something, large or small. And that sometimes, love has its way, even if only for a moment. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.