

by By Mary M. McGlone, CSJ

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We usually refer to today's Gospel story as the story of the good Samaritan. But the person at the center, the one who most likely represents us and needs to learn something, is the lawyer Jesus wouldn't let off the hook. Luke doesn't name him, so let's call him "Roger." That is in honor of Roger B. Taney, the Catholic Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who delivered the 1857 Dred Scott Decision ruling that former slaves and their descendants could not enjoy the rights of American citizenship. Even if Roger wasn't as discriminatory as Taney, neither was he much like Atticus Finch, the saintly lawyer/father in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Atticus taught that you have to climb into another person's skin and walk around in it before you can understand him. Roger the lawyer of today's Gospel was more concerned about his own birthright than anyone else's skin.

The first thing Jesus probably noticed about Roger was that he didn't understand God's law. Unlike the penal code or voting regulations that legalize discrimination, the law was Judaism's greatest treasure. The purpose of the law — the whole of the Torah, both the written and the oral tradition — was to bring the chosen people ever closer to one another and to God. That's why their psalms sang that the law was refreshing, trustworthy, enlightening, even sweeter than honey.

These feelings express the Jewish understanding of the law as a covenant of love between God and humanity. Unfortunately, Roger had it all upside down. Just notice his first question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" We might suspect that he was waiting for Jesus to say, "You've got nothing to worry about. Everybody can see that you've already pulled yourself up by your own bootstraps!" But Jesus didn't say that, nor did he critique Roger's erroneous assumptions about earning an inheritance (a gift one receives because of the circumstances of birth rather than a reward for effort or achievement).

Luke describes Roger as a "scholar of the law," maybe even a straight A student. When Jesus asked him how he understood the law, he recited the answer by chapter and verse. Roger explained that all that is required of people is to love God with everything they have and know, with all they are and hope to be — and to love their neighbor in the same way. Jesus agreed. Roger had repeated the correct answer.

As if to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he either didn't believe in or didn't understand what he had just said, Roger asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Everyone knows what the question really meant. Roger wanted to know the limits. He was asking, "Just how far are we supposed to take this business of loving with our whole heart, mind and strength? What's really required?"

Seeing that philosophical answers and debates would go nowhere, Jesus told a story. He explained that a fellow, somebody Roger could identify with, was on a road trip when a gang mugged him, took his clothes, his identification and everything he had. With that, the traveler's social status vanished. Suddenly, he was nothing but a wounded nobody. When people of his own kind came along, they didn't perceive that he was one of them. Jesus carefully explained that the passersby maintained their distance, not budging from their secure position on the opposite side of his misery.

We know the rest of the story. A contemptible foreigner saw the wounded victim as someone in need of help. Discerning the signs of the times on his road, the Samaritan reassessed his own position and identity. The circumstances led him to see himself as someone who had oil and wine, a beast and some money. These facts led to what seemed to him an obvious conclusion: He had all that was needed to respond. He took that to mean that he had a responsibility, and he put no limits on what he would do to fulfill it.

When Jesus asked Roger what the law required, Roger quoted Israel's Shema, the daily prayer that proclaimed that Jews were to love God with their entire being. Roger then added the command to love others from the holiness code found in Leviticus, a passage that begins with God's demand: "Be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45).

God's holiness is made visible in love. Atticus Finch would explain that by saying God took on human skin out of love, to teach us how to love one another. If we want to receive God's life, all that is required is that we walk our road, willing to love with our whole heart and mind and strength. That is all God asks of us.

DEUTERONOMY 30:10-14

Chapter 30 of Deuteronomy begins with Moses' promises that grace is available to any who will turn to God. Moses' good news culminates in the promise that "God will circumcise your hearts ... so that you will love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart and your whole being, in order that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6). There is no better promise for human flourishing than that.

In today's selection, Moses assures his people that they are fully capable of listening to the Lord, of keeping God's commandments, and returning to God with all they are. Stephen Cook in *Reading Deuteronomy* explains that this passage demonstrates that "God's revelation is relevant as is; it is intelligible." He adds that, "The Book of Deuteronomy knows nothing of elitism or asceticism." The point is that we do not need great visionaries or philosophers to know how to live a fully human life that is pleasing to God.

We might understand this reading as Moses' down-to-earth summary of the law. In the past, Moses had heard the thundering voice of God, and his people were terrified by the signs and wonders they saw. But those events were extraordinary. Human beings wouldn't accomplish anything if such extraordinary occurrences were their daily fare. Moses wanted his people to understand that ordinary life was where they could live in God's grace.

For some, Moses' message is a comfort. But for many — in our own time as well as in Moses' day — the message presents an enigmatic combination of disillusionment and challenge. We can be disillusioned because we want our religion to be difficult, extraordinary and otherworldly. The thought that saints without halos live on our block deflates our fascination with awe and mystery. We prefer saints with the stigmata to firefighters injured on the job.

At the same time, the realization that we are each called to holiness can feel like an overwhelming challenge. In spite of its awful defects and dangers, clericalism offers us an escape hatch: They are the ones who should give the example, live holy lives, etc. When we can shift the responsibility to the "religious professionals," everybody else can take a pass — or at least we can highlight the flaws among the priests and religious and claim that if they don't measure up, what can be expected of us ordinary people?

Moses debunks those attitudes. God's law is not up in the sky so that you have to be a mystic astronomer to understand it. It is not across some sea so that we have to get an ecclesial passport and take a cruise to find it. "No," Moses admonishes them, essentially saying, "God's ways are in your very bones. It is your nature as a human to live the way God intended, you just tend to distort it in ways you think will make you content but end up bringing misery to you and those around you."

In the long run, Moses is saying, "If you want to know how to be holy and happy, search your heart." Augustine in *The Confessions* of St. Augustine said the same thing, "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee." We can translate them both as saying, "Love, and do what you will" (Augustine, *Sermon on the First Epistle of John* 4:4-12).

PSALMS 19:8, 9, 10, 11

When we think of law, we tend to imagine things like speed limits and radar or Title IX requirements for equality of

opportunity. When psalmists speak of the law, they think of the Torah, which is, at minimum, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Pentateuch) and, more broadly, God's revelation in written and oral tradition.

Psalm 19:11 advertises the flavor the Torah leaves in the mouth of those who love it. "Sweeter than honey" is hardly a phrase we would use for most laws, but the psalmists invite us to taste the Torah, the law of the Lord, as God's gift to humanity. They know how sweet it is to live in harmony with one another and God.

When we sing that the decree of the Lord is trustworthy, we are saying that we trust in our relationship with God. God's ways give joy to our heart and light to our eyes. We summarize what it means to live in relationship with God by singing, "Your words, O Lord, are Spirit and life."

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

This passage is a hymn honoring Christ. That gives it certain qualities and limitations. It was also composed — whether by Paul or others — long before the time of the "Christological controversies" that tried to describe Christ's relationship to God or trinitarian theology. While the teachings that came out of those debates may have found support in this and other Christian Scriptures, Paul did not address questions of dogma in this song.

With that in mind, we can ask, what was Paul saying that has relevance to us and our worship?

First, let us consider the idea of a hymn. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal reminds us of what every romantic knows without being told: "Singing is the sign of the heart's joy." And it quotes Augustine as saying, "Singing is for one who loves" (#39). We sing and dance and clap our hands when the emotion and meaning of our prayer exceed what the intellect can express; it all overflows into bodily expression. With that as the backdrop to this selection, we can listen to it as an expression of love rather than doctrine.

Paul begins by saying that Christ is the image of the invisible God. He is proposing this idea to people who, like us, had never seen Christ in the flesh. Remember, Paul's writings say almost nothing about the life and ministry of Jesus; his theology centers on the cross and resurrection. As the rest of the hymn bears out, Paul wants us to see Christ as the image of God, not simply in the way that all of creation images its maker, but as God's ultimate, most tangible, self-revelation. As God's self-revelation, Christ reveals God as creator and reconciler.

Paul describes Christ as active in ongoing creation, creating spirit and matter, all things visible and invisible. When Paul says that all things hold together in Christ, he is drawing on the image of Proverbs 8:22-35, "The Lord begot me, the beginning of his works . . . I was beside him as artisan . . . whoever finds me finds life." Two millennia after Paul wrote, Teilhard de Chardin offered a variation on these ideas, depicting Christ in ongoing creation. Teilhard wrote of Christ: "I am the principle of union, the soul of the world. At play throughout the expanding space-time, I am the force . . . that . . . nurtures each newly created form, urging each one to multiply, to beautify, and to bear fruit." (See Kathleen Duffy in *Ilia Delio*, ed. *Christianity and Evolution*, 28.)

Having begun with a meditation on the Cosmic Christ, Paul turns around and underlines Jesus' saving activity as the revealer of God's reconciling love, a love demonstrated through the cross and resurrection. Paul knows that the cross is the most iconoclastic self-revelation God can offer a humanity perennially prone to self-aggrandizement. Thus, Paul underlines the idea that the fullness of divinity dwelt in the crucified and risen Christ. The Gospel of John communicates this idea by showing us Jesus, the Master and Lord, washing the feet of the disciples.

The hymn to Christ that we hear today encourages us to wonder and marvel at God's astonishing revelation of godliness. The two dimensions of the hymn converge to balance one another in our imagination. When we think of the grandeur of the creator of the universe, this hymn reminds us that Christ revealed divine love in vulnerable self-giving. When we contemplate the crucified Jesus, we see him in the light of the Christ, who holds all creation together from the beginning. Allowing these images to illumine one another, we contemplate the truth that in God all things are possible.

LUKE 10:25-37

We can take this little incident, unique to the Gospel of Luke, in a multitude of directions because it touches almost every theme in the Gospel. The scene opens with a lawyer addressing Jesus. Luke tells us the two key things that sum up the

lawyer's attitude. He was testing Jesus and he was self-righteous. When Luke says that the lawyer was testing Jesus, he uses the same word Jesus used in reply to the devil in the desert: "You shall not put the Lord ... to the test" (italics added). Luke sees the story of this testing lawyer as an example of humanity's propensity to fence in God's love and its requirements. Of course, anyone who has read the Gospels knows that self-righteous people who test Jesus are setting themselves up for an object lesson in humility. The wind is about to be vacuumed out of the lawyer's sails.

"What is written in the law? How do you read it?" Jesus' counter-questions obliged the lawyer to articulate his own understanding of the covenant. The lawyer answered that the law demands absolute love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and a similar love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). The citation from Leviticus comes in the context of Chapter 19, which God summarizes by saying: "Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy." This reminds Israel that because they are created in God's image, their vocation is to be like their God.

Jesus affirmed the lawyer's answer, and their agreement on the requirements of the commands set the stage for the next question. Deuteronomy specifically called on God's people to love their own. (The etymology of the word neighbor in English and Latin-based languages refers specifically to those who are nearby, implying that we should care for those we hang out with.) Jesus' story challenges that narrow interpretation. He suggests that the neighbor is anyone we see who is in need.

This presents an almost overwhelming challenge in an age of global communications. How are we to respond to all the needs we can see today? The Samaritan exhibited two essential qualities that made him a true neighbor. First, he saw the injured man as one like himself. Not knowing his name, faith or past reputation, he saw him simply as a brother in need. Secondly, the Samaritan saw his own possessions and time as potential gifts rather than treasures to be guarded. When we see the needs of our global neighbors, the first thing necessary is to remember that we are all part of the same family and to allow that to discomfort us. Then, with the weight of the neighbor in our heart, we can assess what we have in goods, talent, influence, etc. that we can use to make a difference for the ones in need. We can't do it all, but doing something makes all the difference to the ones we touch. Such action is the most striking way to proclaim the Gospel.

Planning: 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

If last Sunday's first reading prompted us to rethink our image of and language about God, our text from St. Paul today might lead us to a deeper understanding of Christ. Most people tend to use "Jesus" and "Christ" as interchangeable names for the same person. Paul and many subsequent theologians suggest a different view. They sometimes speak of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. We cannot fully separate them, of course.

Jesus is the Christ, which is translated "the anointed one." But Paul describes a Christ who existed before the historical Jesus and whose reach extends to the end of time: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." In this perspective, Jesus is the human incarnation, the human flesh of the Christ, while Christ is the plan of God for the whole universe from the beginning. Paul says, "in him all things hold together." Unity is the beginning of creation (think of the Big Bang from a single point) and the goal of creation. And that unity includes unity among people and other parts of creation as well as unity between God and creation.

The Gospel parable reminds us of the scope of God's plan and the primary means of its fulfillment. Salvation is not limited to one nation or race or people. Even enemies like the Jews and Samaritans have to come together. And the means of creating such unity is love. "Who is my neighbor?" the Jewish scholar asks. The proper question is "Who is not my neighbor?" We all come from the same source and are destined to the same fulfillment in Christ. How can we exclude anyone from our love and concern?

This focus on unity is also supported by Paul's reminder that Christ is the head of the body, the church. If we are one body, then we all have to care for one another and learn to live in harmony.

This, of course, is an ideal that is never fully realized in human affairs. Dissension and disagreement are an inevitable part

of the human experience. Yet these do not excuse us from loving and caring. Jesus commanded us to love even our enemies, so we surely should care for our brothers and sisters even when we disagree.

So how do we communicate such ideas and vision to the parish? Certainly, preaching about the cosmic Christ can help. Prayers can lift up the call to unity in Christ. But perhaps we also need to ask ourselves if we as parish ministers give witness to the quest for unity in our own actions and interactions. Example speaks louder than words! If your own example seems weak in this area, what can you do to foster better unity as a team of ministers?

Prayers: 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Figuring out how to live in faith can sometimes create a confusion of copious rules, regulations, practices and prohibitions. The reality, however, is a rather simple “heart and soul” thing. Loving and responding to God cannot happen apart from loving one’s neighbor with deep compassion. Today’s Gospel reminds us that the neighbor might not be the one we would choose to love. The good Samaritan story is a cautionary tale that catches our attention for good reason.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you understood the deepest meaning of the law and the commandments: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you challenge us to examine who is truly our neighbor: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to live with compassion for the most marginalized: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now that our faith may be rooted and expressed in the great commandment.

Minister For a church committed to compassion, love and care, which supersedes all other concerns, including power, authority and institutional issues, we pray:

- For a willingness to explore our role in a culture where many narrowly decide who are neighbors, where neighborhoods are judged safe or unsafe, where people congregate only with those who meet their social, religious or political expectations, we pray:
- For those whose lives are lived in constant fear, who have never experienced safety or compassion, who feel they belong nowhere and are loved by no one, we pray:
- For programs that bestow dignity on those who need it most and focus more on care than cost, we pray:
- For those whose faith is rooted in rigid practices or keeping the rules, who have not experienced the power of helping those in need, or are unable to see how we are united as children of God, we pray:
- For all in this community who are sick, suffering, grieving or in any kind of need, especially those whose needs we have not yet discovered or addressed, we pray:

Presider God of love, your precepts are described as perfect and right. They are given in the simple but demanding command to love you and others by our actions. Help us to follow your Son, who demonstrated the power of this love. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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