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Finding God

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Scripture for Life

Where do you go when you are looking for God? Do you go to a church? Do you find God there in the silence among the worn pews and the scent of flowers and incense? Perhaps you find God in nature's cathedral -- in the quiet forest, or the regal mountains, or by the sea. Some find God in between the notes of a symphony; others in the mysterious maze of a labyrinth. Others find God in the complexity of the sciences, in biology, chemistry, physics. Still others experience God's presence in the rhythm of a well-turned phrase or in a majestic hymn.



Fifteenth Sunday in
Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 30:10-14

Psalm 69

Colossians 1:15-20

Luke 10:25-37

Perhaps you believe that to find God you need only look within yourself, where the Spirit of God has chosen to abide. Certainly, the Deuteronomist was of such a mind. In today's first reading, the seventh-century B.C. author represents Moses urging the Israelites to take God's law (i.e., God's mind, God's will, God's very presence) to heart. No need to fly to the sky or sail the sea. On the contrary, insists the ancient writer, God's presence in the law is already in our mouths and hearts. We, for our part, are to carry it out.

In today's Gospel, the Lucan Jesus invites us to find the presence of God in one another. Through the parable of the Samaritan who proved himself to be good, believers are taught to seek out the presence of God not only in those we love, respect and admire but also -- and especially -- in the poor and the victimized.

The priest who saw the victim and passed him by was probably thinking about God. Perhaps he was on his way to pray in the synagogue in Jericho or in the temple in Jerusalem. To enter those holy places, the priest could not be ritually defiled by a man who was bloody or maybe even dead. So it was with the Levite. Rather than risk his own holiness, he, like the priest, passed by on the opposite side of the road. We cannot judge their motives; we can only allow their actions to remind us of the times we may have acted similarly. I am reminded of a friend's experience. Her car had a flat tire on a busy road, and she and her five small children stood nearby as her oldest son, a 12-year-old, was struggling with the damaged tire. Dozens of cars passed by. No one stopped. Someone even rolled down the window and shouted, "I'd like to help you but I'm on my way to church."

There were no such excuses offered by the protagonist of Luke's parable. He was a Samaritan, hated by Jews and avoided at all costs. Nevertheless, he showed himself a friend to the man who had been victimized. With mercy, he tended the man; with great generosity, he provided for his care while he recouped his strength. He is the one whom Jesus held out in response to the question "And who is my neighbor?"

While we cannot know fully the motivation of the Samaritan, we can surely consider our own reasons for helping others in need. First and foremost is the fact that Jesus has invited us to find him there. Where there are poor, hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless and otherwise victimized, Jesus is within them, waiting to be noticed, waiting to be nurtured, waiting to be loved, waiting for us to allow him to love us, too. When we minister to God's poor ones, we minister to God. Therefore, in our ministering we must be aware that we are touching the very God who made them and us. Our words must be gentle, respectful and kind. Our attitude must be merciful, but not one of pity. Nor are we to judge, criticize or assign blame. Our compassion must be personal so that those we serve do not feel themselves a burden, but know themselves to be blessed.

While we may agree, on an intellectual level, that all others are our neighbors and that we will find God by ministering to them, there is still the considerable challenge of acting on this conviction. "You have only to carry it out," said the Deuteronomist (first reading). "Go and do likewise," said Jesus to his disciples. As these words are repeated today in our hearing, we too are charged: Go and do likewise to all people, without bias or hesitation.

Who is my neighbor? Who is not my neighbor?

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