

27 January, 2008
Fr. Richard L. Green

Well, this gospel reading we've just heard is the gospel reading that has been assigned to us for "We Will Stand With You" Sunday, which is our diocesan celebration of the relationship that we have with St. Paul's Church in Lakeview in New Orleans. It seems very timely.

It's probably one of the most widely known of all of Jesus' parables. There are even laws on the books called Good Samaritan laws. It seems, sometimes, that we need to look at these things with a little bit fresh eyes – hopefully we can do that. There's this whole notion here- this is part of a larger story, this is the parable that Jesus is telling when asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" and Jesus responds by telling this inquirer (whose inquiry is not purely informational, I think it's probably a setup), "Love your neighbor. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." And this lawyer says, "Well, who *is* my neighbor"? And so Jesus tells this story.

When I was a little kid and I heard this story, I thought it really strange that this man didn't know who his neighbors were. Because in the town I lived in, you knew everybody. The Hensley's lived next door, and he was a housepainter and their chicken yard was right up against ours and my mother always complained that every time it rained our backyard got fertilized. And the big green flies that came with it, she didn't like those much, either.

And then on the other side was the Cleavers (not *those* Cleavers - it wasn't that kind of a neighborhood). She was a Czech and he was a Cajun. And the Dorsey's lived behind us, they were Czechs, too. A lot of Czechs in Southeast Texas.

Across the street were the Munson's and a few others and I thought: How does somebody not know their neighbors? Well, later I found it was a little deeper question, only slightly deeper.

But the notion of neighbor in Jesus' culture was a good bit different than ours. In that culture people kind of life clan-like, if not absolutely clan. It was similar to that. There was a very close relationship; you were blood kin or you were fellow clan members, tribe members. It was all but a political sort of a connection. And those are the people that you would associate with. And others? Hmm, questionable.

And so when this lawyer asked, 'who's my neighbor', he's really trying to pry into this whole idea of, 'who is it that I will associate with? Who are my allies?' And so when Jesus tells this little story, this is not the answer that the attorney was looking for, I dare say. Because the story, as it's told, is one in which there is challenge at any number of levels, here.

This man is on business, he's going down the road, he falls among thieves, they beat him, they rob him, they leave him for dead. The first people that come by are the ones that this lawyer is probably assuming would be the neighbors, who would act in a neighborly way, who would do the sorts of things that you would expect. But they didn't. They cross over and they go on their way; they leave him.

Now the next is one of the priests. Now, if he gets near what may be a dead body, he's ritually unclean, it's going to take weeks of ceremonialism to purify so that he can conduct the rites of the temple. So he weighs these two and finds that it would grossly inconvenient to have to do that and irresponsible on his part, given his office. Similarly with the Levite. That sort of thing.

But then the person who does stop, who picks this man up, who doctors him, who puts him on his own animal, who takes him to an inn, who gets him a room, who looks after him even further. He leaves money with the innkeeper and agrees to come back and pay whatever expenses come later – is the last person in the world that this lawyer would expect Jesus to say is going to be the neighbor. He is a Samaritan.

Well, now if you want to get an idea of what it would be like, what this relationship between the Jews and the Samaritan was, imagine this: It's today. And there's an Israeli man going between Jerusalem and Jericho. And he's by himself and some young toughs who are part of Hamas jump him at a stop sign, drag him out of his car, beat him up, rob him, leave him on the side of the road. Then an orthodox rabbi comes by, [and] leaves him. Then a member of the Knesset comes by, leaves him. Then a member of Hezbollah stops, picks him up, takes him to a motel, doctors him up, blah, blah, blah. That's the level of enmity that we're talking about between Samaritans and Jews in the first century.

This lawyer didn't want to hear this stuff. This is really difficult stuff because he [Jesus] is saying that in your hour of greatest need and in your greatest vulnerability, it may be the one you despise most who is going to render aid to you. And in the reverse, you to them. And your place of greatest power, greatest one-up over your most dastardly enemy; you may be called on to help them.

Well, that is a lot different than just 'be nice to people that you find on the side of the road'. This is not just a story about, oh, you should be nice to folks. It challenges at the level of our deepest prejudice. It's really a story about prejudice, about all the ways that we find to separate our selves from one another and Jesus is saying in this story that those are erased. That those are fabrications. That those are the things that we make up to separate rather than come together. And that this is a story about erasing those. About coming together, recognizing the connections that we have even with those that at our ego level we absolutely despise. They annoy us. They're lazy, all the things that we can come up with about other people and other peoples that we can use to keep ourselves apart from them so that we won't be tainted.

This next week there are six of us from this parish who are going to New Orleans as part of the diocesan mission team and we are something around 20 or a few more. We are here today to be commissioned by you to go in your name on this mission trip. And we'll bring them up in a few minutes. You'll get to see. And it seems that what we bring with us into this whole enterprise is some of the same challenge. Because on both the side of the givers and the receivers and on this we are the designated givers and they are the designated receivers. And certainly as is always the case in these enterprises, it usually goes as much the other ways as the obvious way. We will end up receiving at least as much as we give, if not more. But all these things will be coming up. Because we will be going to a place where the culture and the people are not even remotely like here. There are places in this world that are different from one another and Longview, Washington and New Orleans, Louisiana are two of them.

And unless you have lived in the South and you know what people think about Yankees coming down with big pocketbooks and a handful of gimme and a mouthful of much-obliged, you just don't know what we might be facing. Oh, yes, they'll be so cordial and as soon as we turn around – '*Yankees*' – every little idiosyncrasy, like – 'Oooh, I can't stand that Tabasco sauce, it's so *spicy*' – you can just imagine. And they think that salmon comes in cans – that God puts it in the rivers in cans. We are very different people and we have very different histories and very different ways of looking at the world. And we will be walking into a hotbed of resentment.

And still we go. And our buttons will be pushed and I am sure we will push theirs. We are not the same, and yet there we are. And we are them and they are us. We are connected to them in ways we will never understand. We don't speak the language the same. Few of our cultural idiosyncrasies overlap. And yet, we are one. We are connected to them and them to us. And that is how we can live out this story.

The assumption is that the Samaritan and the Hebrew who he comes to aid end up being fast friends. They may have despised each other, even after the story is over and they go back to their lives. And yet they are connected forever. And so it will be for us. We have no idea what our experience is going to be like and they don't know what it's going to be like for them to have us among them. But we are connected. And we are one in Christ.

Amen.