

“The Good Samaritan”
Fr. Thomas Esposito, O. Cist.
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 10, 2016
Christ the King/Abbey
Dt 30:10-14; Col 1:15-20; Lk 10:25-37

“We use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn’t stop. At times we say they were busy going to a church meeting, an ecclesiastical gathering, and they had to [hurry along] so they wouldn’t be late for their meeting. At other times we would speculate that there was a religious law that [a priest or a Levite] engaged in religious ceremonials was not to touch a human body twenty-four hours before the ceremony. And every now and then we begin to wonder whether maybe they were not going [...] down to Jericho to organize a Jericho Road Improvement Association. That’s a possibility. Maybe they felt it was better to deal with the problem from the causal root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effect.

“But I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible that those men were *afraid*. You see, the Jericho road is a dangerous road. [...] It’s really conducive for ambushing. [...] In the days of Jesus, it came to be known as the ‘Bloody Pass.’ And you know, it’s possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it’s possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking, and he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the priest asked, [and] the first question that the Levite asked, was, ‘If I stop to help this man, *what will happen to me?*’

“But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to *him?*’ [...] Jesus ended up saying *this* was the good man, this was the *great* man, because he had the capacity to project the ‘I’ into the ‘Thou’, and to be concerned about his brother.”

Those words I just read, dear friends in Christ, are not my own; they came from the mouth of another pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr. He offered this meditation on the Good Samaritan parable near the end of his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech in 1968, delivered just one day before his tragic death at the hands of a mad assassin. The Church’s liturgical calendar invites us to ponder this unforgettable parable this weekend, and I felt compelled to share Dr. King’s words

with you today, just days removed from the murders of innocent police officers just a few miles from here.

We have referred to our police officers, those slain on Thursday and those still among us, as heroes, as Good Samaritans, and rightly so. But the Gospel parable requires us to examine *why* they imitate the Samaritan who had mercy on the fallen man and *how* they fulfill the command of our Lord, directed at all of us, to “Go and do likewise.”

Jesus intended to shock his first century listeners with this parable. The Samaritans were distant relatives of the Jews, and they *hated* each other with the irrational wrath reserved only for the closest of bonds. St. Luke gives us an example of this hatred at the end of the parable: the lawyer cannot even bring himself to say the word “Samaritan” when he admits that only the man from that despised tribe was merciful to the lawyer’s fellow Jew in agony on the side of the road. A present-day portrayal of the parable might feature a Palestinian coming to the aid of an Israeli, or an illegal immigrant from Mexico caring for a certain presidential candidate.

Luke does not provide us with the Samaritan’s motive for doing what he did, nor does he record the reactions of others listening to Jesus speak this parable. But the love which clearly animated his actions is reflected in the question Dr. King puts in the mind of the Samaritan: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?” This man did not see race when he tended the enemy of his people lying half-dead on the roadside; he did not hesitate to sacrifice his time, his food and drink, and his money to restore a fellow human being to life. He overcame the *fear* that sent the priest and the Levite scurrying to the other side of the highway, and he conquered the *anger* that must have tempted his heart as he approached the robbers’ victim, the hated Jew.

That same heroic charity animates the hearts of the vast majority of our police officers. In carrying out their work, they reveal their willingness to sacrifice their lives, a willingness shared by Jesus when he became the robbers’ victim on the cross. Only an unselfish heart can make a sacrifice of this sort. In such a heart as that which belonged to the Good Samaritan, to Jesus, to the slain officers, there is no room for fear or anger, because perfect love, as we read in the First Letter of John, casts out all fear, and channels anger to constructive, not destructive, ends.

Dear friends in Christ, we all too frequently take the role of the priest and Levite in the parable, worrying about what will happen to us. We are too afraid to inconvenience ourselves, too angry to reflect peacefully, too selfishly devoted to our ignorant prejudices to listen to anyone who formulates a different opinion. A dangerous blend of fear and anger, two terrible spiritual cancers,

is dominating our public discourse at present. Propagating fear in our community is nothing more than cowardly crossing to the other side of the road. Fomenting anger in the form of smugly self-righteous rants on social media, or waiting for someone else to enact a constructive solution, is to avoid the wounded heap of humanity placed in your path, a broken person or people who can either be ignored or be given a reason to hope and a worthy cause to live for.

I would ask you, brothers and sisters, to meditate quietly on this parable in the coming days, and to ponder your own role in overcoming your own prejudices and binding the wounds of your neighbors, whoever they might be. We must pray for “a kind of dangerous unselfishness,” to quote Dr. King again, the selfless mercy to perceive in our scarred brothers and sisters of any race, of any social status, the face of Christ. Each of us must discern calmly what he or she can contribute to the building up of trust and the eradication of injustices in our community. May we pray for, and receive, the courage to love our neighbors as Christ loves them, the wisdom to correct injustices when they confront us, and the peace of Christ which alone breaks down the dividing wall of enmity and unites what men have divided. Amen.