

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

What if the parable of the Samaritan and the traveler isn't all we make it out to be?

It's a simple story, really. It tells a moral tale. A certain man was traveling to Jericho. Along the road, some thieves stripped him of his clothing, beat him senseless, and left him for dead, naked, alone, and broke. Two of Jerusalem's religious elite pass by him. Neither of them helped him, but did their best to avoid the man by walking around him on the other side of the road. It wasn't until a Samaritan came along—a half-breed lowlife, according to the Jews—that the man finally received some help.

This certain Samaritan bandaged the man's wounds, salving him with wine and oil. Then, placing him on his own animal, he takes the man to an inn, pays for his room and board, and sees to it that the innkeeper takes care of him, promising to repay him any extra expenses upon his return. It was certainly a good thing that the Samaritan had done, but you'll notice that nowhere in the parable does Jesus call him good, as has become part of our parlance—the Good Samaritan.

But that is the moral of the story. If you want to be good—and be saved—then, “Go and do likewise,” as Jesus said.

Is that how you hear it, though? Is that how you read it, as Jesus asked the lawyer? When it comes to parables, treating them allegorically is par for the course. And why not, when so many begin, “The kingdom of heaven is like...”? Even though this parable does not begin this way—even though Jesus does not compare the kingdom to the Certain man and Certain Samaritan—we allegorize; even the Church Fathers did so. Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine—even Luther—and others made the characters and places of the parable represent one thing or another. Often, the man represented the Old Adam, his wounds are sins or the consequences of sin, the priest and Levite are the Old Testament or Law, the Samaritan is Jesus Christ, the oil is the grace of God, and the inn is the Church.

That's how you like parables, though. It makes the parable mean something bigger. It makes it an illustration of something bigger than yourself. It removes from you all responsibility, shifting it onto someone or something else. So, for instance, if the Samaritan is Jesus and the Inn church, then you can see yourself, or part of yourself, in the man beset by thieves. Now, Jesus binds your wounds, anoints you with the oil of his grace in order to forgive your sins and restore you to life, setting you in the church where he tells the innkeeper pastor to take care of you, supplying all that he needs to care for your needs.

It all makes for a nice illustration—and it fits the reality of your life in the church—but if you allegorize the parable, then that makes Jesus' “Go and do likewise” meaningless. Like I said before, allegorizing this parable removes from you all responsibility. This parable is a story with a moral given to the lawyer who sought to justify himself. So, when Jesus tells the lawyer to go and do likewise, he was referring to the Samaritan, “He who showed mercy on” the certain man.

Recall the lawyer's questions. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds, “What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?” The lawyer responds well: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’” “Do this and you will live,” Jesus responds. Of course the lawyer couldn't stop there; he needed to justify himself. To make sure that he was loving his neighbor, or more likely to prove that he really was loving his neighbor, he asks, “And who is my neighbor?”

That's when Jesus tells the parable. And in light of the exchange between the lawyer and Jesus, especially the lawyer's final question, “Go and do likewise,” makes more sense. This is the moral

of the parable, if you're looking for something to do to be saved, love God and love your neighbor as yourself, and your neighbor is anyone in need whom you meet upon the way.

Loving God is easy. No, really, it is. "I love God;" go ahead and say it. It's that easy. Is there anything you can do to show it? Is there anything you can do to prove it to someone else? Well, I suppose you can read His Word. You can show up to church every Sunday or Feast Day. Or, you could easily redefine what it means to love God or redefine who God is—you know, be "spiritual"—and so long as you do that or are that, then you can say that you love God, and no one can say any differently.

Loving your neighbor is more difficult. That's why the lawyer asked who his neighbor was. You just can't say, "I love my neighbor." There are actually neighbors out there to love—real, tangible, needy neighbors who need what you have to offer; neighbors to and for whom you can do things. So, if all you do is say, "I love my neighbor," but do nothing to show true care and concern for them, help them when they need help, etc., do you really love your neighbor? No!

It seems with this parable that the world has it right and the church gets it wrong. As I mentioned before, "Good Samaritan" is a term that has made it into our parlance for one who does a good deed for a stranger. There are organizations who have taken the name whose purpose is to be of service to those who are in need, like the certain man in the parable. These Good Samaritans are of service to their neighbor, no matter who that neighbor is. And the church wants to turn it into an allegory, ignoring "Go and do likewise."

There is a reason that Jesus told the parable. The lawyer needed to learn who his neighbor really was, and that he needed to be in service to all of his neighbors. Without it, he would have thought that his neighbors are only people like him, people with whom he associates, people with whom he can associate, and that it was only these kinds of people are the ones he could serve and help. Jesus tells him that his neighbor is also the man who is unclean for the sake of his wounds and unapproachable for the sake of his breeding.

"Go and do likewise." There's the answer to the question. "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" You shall love God and love your neighbor as yourself by being of service to him.

How difficult! There's a story of a theology professor who taught a course on the parables of Jesus. Exam time arrived, and the students came nervously to the exam hall. When it was time for the students to enter, an official came and told them that the exam had been moved elsewhere, some distance away. The students quickly made their way to the new location, stepping around a man along the way, drunk and lying in the gutter. As each student reached the new room and opened the paper, they gasped, for there was only one question: What is the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan? They all scribbled away, trying to reproduce everything that the lecturer had told them. A week later, the results of the exam were published; everyone had failed! They had all stepped around the man in the gutter (probably the professor, not really drunk), and so had not learned the meaning of the parable.

It's like I said, loving your neighbor is a difficult—nay, impossible—thing to do. Sure, like the lawyer, you get along fine loving those who are like you and those you get along with. But what about everyone else whom you encounter? What about the ones you don't get along with? What about your enemies? Love them, too! Because if you don't love them, you don't really love God. "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also." (1 John 4:20-21)

Oh, you may want to do it, but you find yourself unable to do so. The good that you want to do—like the Good Samaritan—you do not do, the evil that you do not want to do, that you keep on doing. (cf. Romans 7:19) No, like the priest and Levite, you are more dead to your neighbors, who may be dying on

the road side and in need of your care, than like the Good Samaritan. Who will deliver you from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ your Lord! (cf. Romans 7:24-25)

You see, the world will leave you beaten and naked, broke and unable to help yourself. Your Old Man would do the same, all under the guise of being your friend, being your help, lying to you by telling you that you are good or good enough, at loving God and your neighbor. You are like the Levite, like the priest, and very much like the man on the way to Jericho.

This, dear Baptized, this place, then, is the inn into which you have been taken, having been bound and oiled and wine, taken care of. Here to Good Samaritan, Jesus Christ, has taken you on his own beast—carried on His own shoulders as it were, a sheep of the Lamb of God—saved from the body of death. And here, He bids the innkeeper to care for you, promising to give all that is needed for your care when He returns.

Jesus returns to this place all the time. He is present in His Word and Sacraments, giving of Himself for your care, just as He first gave Himself in order to bandage and oil and wine you. He gave Himself over to death in order to rescue you from the body of death. Into His body, Jesus took your wounds, and by His stripes, you are healed. (cf. Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:23-24) Jesus received those stripes in your stead, beaten to within an inch of his life like the certain man, then nailed to a cross and left to die, like the certain man. But He is not just a certain man; He is the Samaritan who swaps places with you and receives your punishment for sin in order that He may be salve you with His grace—that wonderful oil and rich wine..

So, yeah, allegorizing the parable can work. It speaks to the reality of your life in the church this way. First, though, the parable shows you that if you want to do something to be saved, you must love God and neighbor, but the Word of God—His Law, specifically—shows you that you are unable to do so. As allegory, the parable shows you the reality of your life as a Christian: that Jesus is your Good Samaritan, the only One who can be called good (cf. Luke 18:19), because He has come for you, given His life for you, and continues to come to you to pronounce to you through His chosen innkeeper that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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