

Trinity 13

I take as my text today, from St. Luke's Gospel:

But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.

Every Sunday, except when we have the Decalogue, we begin our liturgy with the words of our Lord reminding us to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We call this the Summary of the Law because, according to our Lord, these two commands, in themselves, sum up and fulfill the **Ten Commandments** given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. We refer to them as the *Two and Great Commandments*.

In the first commandment, and in the Summary of the Law, we are reminded to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. If you really think about it, that is a Christian obligation of the greatest magnitude — we are to love God from the very depths of our being.

Take a moment to think about that. God should always be in our thoughts and in our hearts, and always be the driving force in our lives.

But is he?

What about our neighbor? How do we feel about the person next door; someone across town; or anywhere in the world, for that matter? Do we love others, that is, other than family, as much as we love ourselves? That is, is our love self-centered or does it extend to a love of all that God has created, including human beings and animals, even the plants, all of God's Creation?

Generally speaking, I would dare to say that most Christians throughout the world feel they pretty well understand the first commandment — but do they?

Do they, do we, understand the obligation of loving God to the extent demanded by the First Commandment?

The obligation to worship God is part and parcel of our love of God — a part and parcel often neglected.

What about the second commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves? Not so simple as it may seem.

The difficulty, as some might suppose, is not just in deciding who exactly is our neighbor — it goes much deeper, as it is also a reflection of our love of God.

Moreover, in today's world, changes within our social framework, occurring over the decades, accelerated in recent years, have led to individuals becoming more insular. We see this more and more as modern technology has further complicated our lives when it comes to personal relationships by putting up an electronic barrier that removes personal interaction from relationships.

More and more, the dictionary definition of neighbor falls short of present reality, and of present technology. In the dictionary sense, the definition of neighbor as one who lives near by, or to live or be near to or next to has become outdated.

But there is still the Biblical sense of neighbor. It is in the context of the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*, where we are confronted with the question, who is our neighbor, a context, while old, that never ceases to be applicable, more especially from our Christian standpoint, even from just a basic human standpoint.

As always, it is when we put Biblical passages into the context of the times they were written, that we find clarity. The parable poses and then answers most clearly the question of who our neighbor is by defining neighbor as a fellow human being.

Of all the parables in the Bible attributed to Jesus, between 30 and 75, depending on how one counts them, the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* is perhaps one of the most unforgettable.

Interestingly, all three of the *Synoptic Gospels* — **Matthew, Mark,** and **Luke** — discuss the encounter with the young lawyer who questions our Lord on the definition of neighbor, but only Luke relates the story of the Good Samaritan, which punctuates the law Jesus has delivered.

While from earliest times, the approach used to give understanding to the parable has been allegorical, in contrast, if we view the parable simplistically, I think it retains its flavor, and delivers its message most emphatically, and brings home exactly the point Jesus was making to the young lawyer who poses a seemingly simple question: *Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*

Now the lawyer was not a lawyer in our modern sense of being a lawyer; rather, he was, by profession, one occupied with the **Mosaic Law**. It was his business to interpret the **Mosaic Law** and to provide guidance on how to relate the law to one's life, relating the law to behavior.

It is also helpful to understand that the Law handed down to Moses on Mount Sinai had been interpolated into 613 commandments, the first ten being the *Decalogue*, or **Ten Commandments**, as we know them. Of these 613, there were 365 negative commandments corresponding to the days of the solar year, and 248 commandments corresponding to the number of bones and main organs in the human body.

These rules served to regulate virtually every aspect of daily Jewish life.

Furthermore, the lawyer knew that, under this **Law**, no Gentile was considered a neighbor; neighborliness was restricted to Jews within the covenant.

The lawyer confronts Jesus with a question essentially on how to obtain life in its fullness. Jesus responds in the technical terms of his questioner and throws the question back in typical fashion: *What is written in the law, how readest thou?*

The lawyer answers with the *Shema*, the necessity of loving God. Jesus commends him.

But the young lawyer, desirous of further instruction, asks: *Who is my neighbor?*

The answer is given in the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. But, in answering the young lawyer, Jesus really turns the whole question around; not *Who is my neighbor?* but rather *Whose neighbor am I?*

It is a beautiful and graphic story of a traveler who is waylaid by thieves and robbers along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The road, really just a well-traveled path, was treacherous. It was circuitous and lonely, and home to thieves and robbers, just unsafe. Priest and Levites, however, because of their religious calling, generally were not bothered and usually made the passage unmolested.

Along this way, a certain man fell victim to the thieves and robbers. We are not told who the man is, whether Jew or Gentile. Beaten and robbed, he lay on the roadside half-dead. Those who left him there were sure he would be found dead.

By chance, a priest approached, perhaps returning from his turn of office in the temple, a priest, a man consecrated to God, a spiritual leader who most certainly would be prepared to show mercy to a stranger injured on the roadside.

Not so. The priest, schooled in the **Law** and certainly aware of loving God and his neighbor, quickly passes to the other side of the road and hurries off.

Another coincidence, a Levite approaches, also, a servant of the Temple, a minister of religious worship, and an interpreter of the **Law**, certainly he should respond to the wounded man.

But just as the priest, he quickly passes to the other side of the road and hurries off.

So far, in our story, we have seen two religious leaders, who should have been the first to translate their faith in God into action by aiding a poor unfortunate soul along the way. Yet here we are seeing what our Lord saw: a heartless, compassionless religion.

Finally, another individual approaches, a Samaritan, an outcast, half-Jew, half-Gentile, with whom no Jew would have dealings.

But rather than hurry off, the Samaritan stops, dismounts, kneels beside the poor man, and gives him, for that day, *first aid*, by pouring oil and wine on his wounds and applying bandages. He sets the man upon his mule and leads the animal and its burden to an inn along the way.

There, he stays the night with the man, caring for him. The next morning he makes provision for his continued care, with a promise to repay any additional expense on his return.

Now, can you imagine the look on the young lawyer's face when Jesus reveals the Samaritan as the rescuer; this Samaritan being the only one who would take the time and effort to care for this injured soul?

What a turn-about!

We must keep in mind that this was certainly not an indictment of all religion. Jesus was not indicating that all religious representatives were cruel and all Samaritans tender-hearted.

More to the point, Jesus was addressing this parable to an uppercrust Jew in a way in which he could most easily understand. It was a strike at the opposite poles around which a vain Jewish life revolved — that is, trusting in their own righteousness while, at the same time, despising others.

Jesus, in recounting this parable, was not pitting the cruelty of one against the kindness of the other. His parable was so constructed that the lawyer was humbled in regard to his self-righteous trust in his birthright as a Jew, while, at the same time, citing the lowly Samaritan for his compassion.

Who of the three was the neighbor?

The lawyer responded, *He that shewed mercy on him.*

Then, said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.

If we are to understand this parable; indeed, if we are to comprehend what we as Christians should practice; then, we must put aside the dictionary concept of neighbor, we must confront the changing concept of personal relationships in this modern age; indeed, we must break through barriers and embrace a universality in defining neighbor as *anyone who needs me.*

This does not mean that we, as Christians, are to allow ourselves to be taken advantage of in our efforts to help those in need. After all, we know, there are many who play upon our vulnerability as Christians, our compassion and desire to emulate our Lord.

The point of this parable is not to undermine rationality but to open hearts and encourage charitableness.

We are told to love our neighbor as our self, and the parable challenges us to rethink what a neighbor is, where, in the Christian concept, neighbor takes on a broader meaning that extends beyond the normal barriers, not abandoning reason but emphasizing that the Christian can know no barriers; Christian love must have no limits; for true Christian neighborliness reveals itself in mercy.

Thus, as we journey through life, our challenge as Christians is to emulate the Good Samaritan himself, Jesus Christ and to reflect the love that emanates from Christ, as we exercise our Christian Duty, not irrationally but kindly and lovingly.