

15TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C
“Making love real again...”

I said a few weeks ago that St. Luke was a great story teller. In terms of being well known, today’s story of the Good Samaritan is runner up to his story of the Prodigal Son. Everybody knows it. I don’t know of any Samaritans living in Puyallup, but they have a Good Samaritan Hospital. The Good Samaritan is synonymous anyone with compassion for the needy and hurting. It is a story that calls us up short when we say we are too busy to help someone in need. Are we, really? The story even tells us that helping someone in distress trumps going to the temple, or, in our case, going to church. (Did I just say that?) The priest and the Levite were on their way to worship God, and so they avoided the man who had fallen in with robbers. Until they heard this story, they thought they were justified. But Jesus tells them, *“Don’t be so sure.”*

When I hear this story I always do a quick reality check. Am I more like the priest and the Levite or the Samaritan? And that is perfectly okay. We should ask that. We can come up with a thousand excuses not to do something that we don’t feel like doing. Well, maybe not a thousand. My mother told me a million times not to exaggerate. What Jesus is doing in this story is redefining the meaning of neighbor. A neighbor is not the person next door but the person in need wherever we encounter them.

Assuming the man who got mugged was a Jew, we would expect the Jewish officials to assist him, but they didn’t. In ancient storytelling this kind of story was known as a “series of three” story. A problem is presented and the first two solutions fail. The third solution is supposed to succeed and it is supposed to represent our side. We would expect the rescuer to be a pious Jew, one of us. What we get, instead, is a portrait of our worst enemy who not only helps the injured Jew but helps him out of his abundance. No

Jew at the time of Jesus could imagine the compassion of God being demonstrated in the person of a hated Samaritan. And that's the point! God can work through anyone. We are not in charge of dictating who can or cannot minister God's compassion to the needy.

I wonder if St. Luke really wanted us to identify with the religious leaders or even the good Samaritan. Maybe he wanted us to see ourselves as the injured man lying along side the road. From that perspective, it doesn't matter who helps us, does it? We ask, "*Will anyone be my neighbor?*" (Sounds like Mr. Rogers.) The religious affiliation, nationality, skin color, or ethnic identity of the one who helps don't mean a thing to a person in need. When we need a blood transfusion, does it really matter if the blood comes from a person whose skin color is different from ours? I'm sure many a bigot has had his life saved by the blood of people he hates.

Now, it is important to remember why St. Luke tells this story in the first place. It doesn't just answer who my neighbor is, but what love of my neighbor looks like.

You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.

Love of God and love of neighbor are great ideas, but if they remain just great ideas, they don't really make any difference, do they. I can memorize the gospel of Jesus word for word, but if I don't live it, what's the point? Love has to be real, it has to mean something in people's lives. Let me tell the story of Dick and Barbara McBride, friends of mine from Long Beach, California.

They took in a seventeen year old girl who had lived in one foster home after another, one bad experience after another. Eventually, she got pregnant. That is why Dick and Barb took her in. One of their daughters gave her her bedroom so she

could have her some privacy. Since Dick was a dentist, he took care of her teeth and made sure she got whatever medical attention she needed. Barb no doubt took her shopping for some nice clothes, and the kids spent time with her. When the baby was born, the time came for the young woman to leave, so she met with the family to express her thanks. She thanked the older daughter for giving her a room, and expressed appreciation for the dental and medical attention she got, as well as the way the kids treated her. Then she turned directly to Dick and Barbara and said something they hadn't expected. She said, *"Thank you for loving each other. I had come to believe that love was just a word that people used to take advantage of others. But the way you obviously love each other showed me that love is possible, maybe even for me."*

Dick and Barbara made love real for this young woman. She could believe in love again. The last time I visited them, this woman, now in her late thirties, was visiting them. Love without power, without action, is sentimentality. Power without love is tyranny. But love and power together changes hearts and makes God, who is love, real.

Last weekend we had the opportunity to make love real to strangers in need by responding to the appeal for the Christian Foundation for Children and Aged. It is a lot easier to give to the needy when they have a face. I came up with a lot of reasons why I didn't need to help, that is until I saw the face of little Ana Karina Valez Ramon, a one year old from Colombia. If I can make love a bit more real in her life for a few bucks a month, what's there to lose? Her picture is now on my refrigerator.

As Christians, our task is more that to just help others in need. It is to make God's love real in a world where there is too much cynicism, hatred, neglect, abuse and violence. Wherever abiding anger, criticism, pride, apathy and irresponsibility are at work in people's hearts, there is no room for love. It is our task to change that, one act of love at a time. And to empower us for this task, we gather here to celebrate the Eucharist. And at

the end of Mass, we are commissioned to go forth to love and serve the Lord. Don't leave early. Please don't. If you do, it shows you just don't get it. We don't come to Mass just to get the graces we need to deal with our problems for another week, we come to Mass so we can be about the work we have called to do in the world. In short, we are commissioned to make love real, believable, in our world again.