

There was a long history of animosity between Jews and Samaritans. The pagan country of Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century B.C. As was the common practice, the Assyrians relocated most of the Jews who lived there and moved foreigners in. Many of these foreigners, it just so happens, converted to Judaism then. These are the ones that eventually get called “Samaritans”.

Now the Jews in the Southern Kingdom where Jerusalem is, never considered these Northern foreigner converts to be real Jews. And there is some truth to that. Even Jesus in John’s Gospel in the story of the Woman at the Well points out that the Jewish faith of the Samaritans is deficient. But the other thing is that the Jews of the Southern Kingdom wanted nothing to do with the Samaritans, they looked down on them, they probably even despised them.

So this is the background of the parable we heard today in which Jesus answers the snide and testing question of the “scholar of the law”. Let’s walk through it.

A man robbed and beaten lay by the side of the road and he’s in pretty bad shape. A priest comes by – not a Catholic priest – a temple priest. He passes on the other side of the road, in fact, he purposely goes to the other side so that he doesn’t have to encounter this man lying there half dead. Immediately we could get inflamed with indignation. How could this priest, who is supposed to be in the service of God, be so callous?

Now Jesus’ hearers at least would have understood that this priest would have become ritually impure if he had gone to the man and it turned out he was dead. Contact with a corpse made one ritually impure and he wouldn’t then have been able to do his priestly duty in the temple. I think Jesus is implying that this isn’t a good excuse, but ok, His hearers might have understood a little.

It’s the same deal with the Levite, the second man who passes by. A Levite is a member of the priestly class. Not a good excuse, but maybe kind of understandable to Jesus’ hearers and certainly understandable to the religious lawyer who asked the question. So Jesus turns up the heat.

A Samaritan passes by – the one who is hated, despised, avoided – shows the man, we can assume he is a Jew, the greatest mercy, cares for him, goes further – gives money for his care and will look in on him again on his way back. And in this the reality of the false excuses of the priest and the Levite fall, and the lawyer is forced to recognize the truth. God’s call to love our neighbor is a call to mercy. A mercy which cannot be bound by false excuses of why we can’t show mercy in any particular situation.

This is a really scary parable for us to hear because this isn’t an extra. The question that was first put to Jesus was, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And the answer was to love God with all your heart, strength, mind, and being, **AND** to love your neighbor as yourself. So if we examine our consciences and think about the opportunities we had to show mercy to someone who was hurting in some way and we come up with false excuses why we couldn’t show mercy, that should scare us into the realization that we’ve done wrong. That we acted like the priest and the Levite and not like the Samaritan, making false excuses, walking on the other side of the road. Now sometimes we have legitimate reasons why we can’t help someone in some particular situation and God honors that. But if we’re honest with ourselves and God, we know that many times our excuses are not legitimate but false. But God, too, is very merciful and forgives us our failures in this regard when we ask Him in our repentance. We see the mercy God is asking us to show and we now want to heed Jesus’ call, “Go and do likewise.”

Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the 15th Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2016.