

Do Unto Others...

(..as God has done unto you)

Scripture lessons: Luke 10:36-37; I John 4:7-12

There is a Jewish legend, dated to about the beginning of the Christian era, of a Gentile who sought to make fun of Jewish learning. He approached the two leading rabbis of the day, the conservative Shammai and the liberal Hillel, each with the request that they teach him the whole law while standing on one foot. Shammai angrily bade him stop mocking at God, and sent him away; Hillel, hiking up one foot, replied, "Do not unto others what you would not have others do unto you. That is the whole law; all the rest is commentary." The questioner, dumbstruck by the wisdom of the answer, was instantly converted.

The same thought, reversed and cast in positive form, is given to Jesus by St. Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount ("Always treat others as you would have them treat you: that is the Law and the prophets" 7:12), and certainly seems to also be behind the final instruction given by Jesus to the lawyer whose question provoked the parable of the Good Samaritan, "Go thou and do likewise." Yet, before we get there, there is one other puzzling reversal, that suggests Jesus really does go well beyond the conventional wisdom of the Golden Rule in this parable, even as he goes well beyond other such conventional wisdoms as "An eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth."

In view of the narrative structure of the story, I've always been puzzled by verse 36 of the parable. The lawyer's original statement, summarising the law (vs. 27), is active: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Jesus approves that. When the lawyer then asks, "But who is my neighbour?" and forces Jesus to the parable, the whole story up to verse 36 is told from an active point of view: the actors who really matter are the three men who come past. The listener identifies with them. The man who got mugged is almost just a prop. He lays there, like a piece of scenery. The focus of the story is on the responses of those who enter the scene. And the ending of the story will be active again: "Go thou and do likewise." The whole focus of the parable is on the actors, on the 'doers', not on the man acted upon. But suddenly, when we reach the critical moment of the parable, the moment that forces the listener – and that is both the lawyer and us – to declare himself or herself – What will you do about this? - the focus shifts. Although the story has asked us to identify with the actors to this point, Jesus' question now is not, as one would expect from all that has gone before, "Which traveller showed that he loved his neighbour?", but rather "From the point of view of the man who fell among thieves, who was his neighbour?" At the crucial moment we are suddenly asked to identify not with his potential or actual rescuers, but with him. The point of view in the parable shifts from the active ("Who is my neighbour?") to the

passive (“Who acted toward me as a neighbour?”) before returning to the active again (“Go and do likewise.”) Although I have always taught the parable – and have always been taught to teach the parable – so that the answer to the initial question is “Your neighbour is anyone who needs your help” – and though I firmly believe that that is the final point Jesus makes when he bids the listener to go and do likewise – for the moment, at verse 36, the answer is “Your neighbour is anyone who helps you.”

Not very important, you think? The pastor’s making a mountain out of a mole hill? Perhaps. But working on the theory that Jesus didn’t do things carelessly, it does seem to have a purpose, this shift in point of view. Consider this: Even if it is Biblical, the Golden Rule, as it stands, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” is really just enlightened self-interest. Despite what we may have been taught, it is not about love. At least, not about love of others. According to the Golden Rule, the reason that you treat others well is because you expect good in return. That is not love; that is mere prudence. You cast your bread upon the waters, because you expect that it will return in three days. (Eccl. 11:1) Well, maybe a bit longer, 30 days, 60 days, payment’s getting slow these days, but in the long run you will get it back, maybe with interest. It is really nothing more than the Mafia law of karma: “What goes round, comes round.” It is ultimately the enshrinement of selfishness: the advice to temper our selfishness now, tame it for the moment, because in the end you will tickle that selfishness even more: you will reap a bigger benefit. It is not love for others that motivates our actions under the Golden Rule, but love of self. And that, I repeat, is not really love at all, but prudence, enlightened self-interest.

And if it does not involve love, acting on the Golden Rule doesn’t even necessarily imply sympathy. If his actions were based on the Golden Rule, the motivation for the Samaritan whom we call Good was not love for the injured man he saw lying there; it was not even sympathy, putting himself in his place and responding because, well, ‘there but for the grace of God go I.’ There is no feeling of human obligation at all – to anyone except one’s self, if you choose, for your future benefit. It is paternalism, in the worst sense: you are the one who has the power to help, it is your option – if you wish – noblesse oblige – ‘maybe there is something I can do to help out here, so that somebody will help me if I should ever find myself in that situation’. But for now you are above it all, looking down.

Life by the Golden Rule is merely self-interest, pragmatism, paternalism, unless...

Well, unless you choose to look at it from the point of view of the man who is lying on the ground, unless you put yourself in the place of the victim. And by changing the focus of the parable, that is just where Jesus demands you put yourself before you decide. If you try to

live by the Golden Rule without admitting your own need, it is cold, without sympathy, self-interested, an academic question. If you merely visualise yourself perhaps in the victim's place, you will at least feel sympathy. 'Gee, unlikely as it is, I might be there some day, and I might need help too': yes, you might feel sympathy, but still self-interest. But if you really put yourself in the place of the victim, of the one who is in need, you will see things from a wholly different angle.

The issue here for Jesus, telling the parable with this reversal, is not 'do unto others as you would have others do unto you', but 'do unto others as has been done for you, when you were in need'. Like when you were lying at the side of the road – whatever road it was, whether you'd been mugged by your own foolishness and sin, or by somebody else – and someone, whether expected or not, stopped and helped.

And because it is the Christ who is speaking, this takes on a deeper meaning: 'Do unto others as God has, in Me, done for you.' Put yourself in that place of need where all of us ultimately dwell – the need of forgiveness, for renewal of life – see yourself lying beside the road of life, where your worst nature and your failed best intentions have conspired to mug you and lay you low – see yourself at the foot of the cross: and then go and do likewise, go and do for others as has been done for you in Christ Jesus.

It would seem that the author we call John learned this lesson well. In his Gospel he has his own "Samaritan" parable. No, I'm not going to argue that it deals with these same issues, or even that he knew of the parable in Luke, but aside from the fact that the main character is also a Samaritan, there is one element in the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well at Sychar that resonates with this story of the Samaritan in Luke. That comes in the verbal exchange between Jesus and the woman about the cup of water. (And before we get into it, it may be helpful to remember that 'when I was thirsty you gave me to drink' is one of the acts of service to a needy brother in still another parable, the sheep and the goats, in Matt. 25:35. I'm not saying that John knew of Matthew's use of it – there's no indication he did, any more than he knew about Luke's Good Samaritan – but giving a drink to somebody seems to have had a certain cultural resonance.) Read from this angle, John seems to suggest, in this interchange, that perhaps we can, at our best, give or even offer one another the service of a drink of water – but the real Water of Life has to come from outside. We have to receive the Living Water – the grace of God, if you will, with all its other baptismal and cleansing and refreshing connotations – before we can really respond to one another – before we can really do unto others, as has been done unto us.

And in the fourth chapter of his first pastoral letter, in the passage that was our second scripture lesson for this morning, John deals with the theme again. I can do little better than read it again, this time in context of what else has been said; it could have been written as a commentary for it: “Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into our world, so that we might have life. That is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us... if this is how God loved us, we should love one another.”

And I myself believe this is the key to understanding still other lines from Matthew, where Jesus sums up the second table of the Law (Matt. 19:19, Matt. 22:39) as “Love your neighbour as yourself.” It’s the “as yourself” that is the problem here: what is meant by that? To the same degree as yourself? It’s fine if you take that to mean don’t love your neighbour less than yourself, but what if you don’t particularly love yourself to begin with? It has always seemed to me that the best answer is to read it as meaning ‘for the same reasons you love yourself’. Which, on the one hand is to say that if we love ourselves for the wrong reasons – because of our race, or our nationality, or our wealth and social status, or our success in life, or our wisdom – we will not be able to love our neighbour, as we will only be able to love that small circle of people just like ourselves, and if we love ourselves because we are such brilliantly good people and so naturally loveable, in the end we’ll not even be able to love ourselves, much less our neighbour, because the truth be told, we’re not really very loveable at all (and neither are our neighbours). It is only when we love ourselves for the only good reason we have for loving ourselves – namely that God loved us first – that we can then love our neighbour – all our neighbours – because God loves them too. Unloveable as we all are. For loving others, just as for doing unto others, we are back to the principle of ‘do unto others as has been done to you’.

So, then, go and do as has been done to you. You cannot save another person, as God redeemed you, but you can forgive them: we are told that by the parable of the unforgiving servant, and by the fifth petition of the Lord’s prayer. We cannot redeem another person, give them the Water of Life, renewing their lives, but we can show love and charity for others, feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, visiting the sick and imprisoned – and by doing for them, you do for him who has already done that for you. You can stop beside the road of life for others, not just because that is the truest worship God desires, not just because God will not tolerate any relationship with Him that does not have room for others, and not just because our circle of love ought to include all who are like us in the most critical way: those who, like us, are loved by God, and not just like us physically or socially. We stop beside the roadside of life to aid others, because God in Jesus Christ stopped

in our world to aid us in our need. Self-interest is nowhere in the picture; we do it out of gratitude, out of a sense of transmitting the love we have received to those who now need it.

Who was your neighbour when you lay there? Go and do likewise, for others, as He did for you.