

The Good Samaritan

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

JULY 11, 2010

by

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Almost four years ago, an astonishing event happened in New York City. A construction worker named Wesley Autrey was standing on a subway platform with his two young daughters waiting for a train. **Suddenly** another man on the platform apparently suffering from a seizure, stumbled and **fell** off the platform onto the subway tracks. Just at that moment the headlights of a swiftly approaching train appeared in the subway tunnel. Acting quickly and with no thought for himself, Wesley Autrey jumped down onto the tracks to rescue the stricken man by dragging him out of the way of the train. But he **immediately** realized that the train was coming too fast and there wasn't time to pull the man off the tracks. So Wesley **pressed** the man into the hollowed-out space between the rails and spread his own **body** over him to protect him as the train passed over the two of them. The train cleared Wesley by **mere** inches, coming close enough to leave **grease** marks on his knit cap. When the train came to a halt, Wesley called up to the frightened onlookers on the platform, "There are two little girls up there. Let them know their Daddy is okay." Immediately Wesley Autrey became a national hero, as people were moved by his selflessness and marveled at his bravery. What he did was at severe risk to his own life. The press nicknamed him, "The Subway Superman," with one headline describing Wesley in biblical terms. It read, "Good Samaritan Saves Man on Subway Tracks."

Many people when they hear the parable of the Good Samaritan ask given certain circumstances, such as a person lying in a ditch or on subway tracks in distress, would I be a Good Samaritan and endanger myself to be of help? But **is** the theme of the parable that we are to go out and imitate the courageous compassion of the Good Samaritan? Perhaps, but the sad reality is that often we **can't** do it. I certainly admire Wesley Autrey's incredible bravery but I could never have done what he did and I suspect almost none of us here would have acted similarly either. It's not in our nature to forget ourselves and risk life and limb for a stranger. Three decades ago there was a famous experiment conducted with Harvard Divinity students. The professor had created a tough three hour written test for a course on "Being A Moral Christian in an Immoral Society." Halfway through the test, he arranged for a ten minute break for the students, so they could leave the room, get fresh air, and then take the last half of the test. At the break, the students went out into the courtyard, where there was iced tea and cookies. There was also a man, all beaten up, in the courtyard, who unbeknownst to the students, was also **part** of the test. All the students looked at him, drank their tea, and ate their cookies and said to themselves, "What should we do? We have this test to take." **All** the students went back into the classroom, some even stepping over the bruised man, to finish the written part of the test. The professor flunked them all! These students couldn't put the Good Samaritan parable into practice, but if we are honest we too have trouble doing the same ourselves. If we are going to be Good Samaritans we need **more** than a change of mind, for what the parable is really describing is a change of **heart** process.

I think the key to understanding the more profound meaning of the parable is to focus not initially on the good Samaritan, but on the wounded traveler. But first a brief mention about the lawyer who instigates Jesus into telling the parable. A lawyer here means a Jewish expert who interprets the Mosaic Law, so his questions were another religious trap for Jesus. He wanted Jesus to tell him that he **was** already doing **what** was necessary to inherit eternal life. By asking the question, **Who's** my neighbor, he would then also know who was **not** his neighbor and he could **exclude** those people. But Jesus is not interested in providing the lawyer with any loopholes and turns his challenge back on the lawyer by asking him to answer his **own** questions and also tells him a parable which answers a **different** question, namely what does it mean to **be** a neighbor.

The original audience for the parable would be forced to ask, "If I were a half-dead person, would I refuse the **only** help available, even if it came from my enemy?" Samaritans were considered traitorous Jews who had betrayed their Jewish heritage by intermarrying with Gentiles who had conquered Israel five centuries earlier, and had theological debates over the proper place to worship and competing versions of the Torah Scriptures. A Samaritan to the Jews would be equivalent for us like a member of the Al Qaeda terrorist group. Jesus is inviting the lawyer to see **himself** in the ditch, as his own religious leaders pass him by on the opposite side of the road, during his hour of need. They are reminiscent of a Garfield cartoon, where Garfield the cat, seated in a comfortable chair, sees his friend, Odie the dog, at the window, obviously suffering, peering in eagerly. Garfield says to himself, "Poor Odie locked outside in the miserable cold. I just can't bear to see him like this. I gotta do something." At this point, Garfield gets up from his chair and closes the curtains! What the parable is suggesting is that we have all metaphorically traveled on the Jericho Road, a dangerous and notorious hiding place for bandits. Pastor Edward Markquart writes, "The Jericho Road is **any** place where there is violence and oppression; it is any place where people are robbed of dignity and robbed of their love and freedom. It is a symbol of suffering in the world. The Jericho Road is **always** with us." The lawyer in attempting to justify himself, meaning prove he was **right**, did not recognize the depth of his own sinfulness. He did not see **himself** as helpless in the ditch, so **he** didn't **need** God's grace. Only those who need grace, have no right to expect it, don't resist it, and have no alternative, can **receive** grace. It is **we**, wounded physically, emotionally, or spiritually, feeling humiliated and powerless, whether it be illness, depression, family trouble, unemployment whatever dire circumstance, needing to be rescued, aware of our limitations, stripped bare by rejection, abandonment, and disillusionment, knowing we can't change our conditions or relieve the pain they cause, who **scream** for God to help us and not ignore us. There was a child who one day was running down the hall at a church on the last day of Bible school. He had in his hand a little ceramic tray he had made for his mother. He had worked on it **all** week. As he ran down the hall to give it to her, he dropped it and it broke into a hundred pieces. The child began to cry. Everybody was trying to comfort him. They said, "It was just a tray." But the child was inconsolable. Finally, his mother arrived and said to the child, "Let's pick up all the pieces and we will take them home and put it together and see what we can make out of it." Is this **not** our God, who when our lives are shattered, does not pass **us** by on the other side of the road, but comes directly to our side, helping us pick up the pieces and create something new out of what is left, offering us life-giving, extravagant hospitality and bringing us to a place of healing?

It is only when grace has rescued us from the ditch that we can **then** become true Good Samaritans for others. It was Martin Luther King who preached that the Samaritan didn't ask, "What will happen to **me** if I stop and help this man?" Instead, he replied, "What will happen to this **man** if I do **not** stop and help him?" One's mission is not to define who **is** one's neighbor, but rather to **know** one can only **be** a neighbor. Undoubtedly, the Samaritan knew what it was like to be despised, oppressed, discriminated against, and to be considered unclean. Having experienced pain, he recognized it when he saw it in the anonymous battered person on the road. Interestingly, the Greek word used for compassion here means to feel the pain of another in one's own gut...right at the center of one's own being. The suffering pain of the beaten man became his **own** pain enabling the Samaritan to overcome the barrier between himself and the other, so his neighbor became **himself** and he had no choice but to move from the detached world of the observer to an active welcoming of the one who needed help. So being a neighbor becomes a vocation I live out, rather than an obligation I'm forced to fulfill. And just as God has embraced **us** in divine mercy, we are called to love as God loves, to embody that love without expectation and conditions and to do so as generously and tenderly as the Samaritan, using every means at our disposal. Of course, the **shock** of the parable is that the one who paradoxically fulfills the law **is** the enemy or religious apostate, the marginalized, the outcast, the least expected of people. The parable dares to suggest that we learn how to show compassion from our **enemies**. The Samaritan challenges us to move beyond our social and religious constructs of good and evil and subverts our tendency to divide the world into insiders and outsiders. He forces us to realize that goodness may be found in those we most often call evil or immoral and that for us to become the Samaritan, we might also be asked to act as the **outsider** taking a risk in a hostile world. Who **was** the traveler's neighbor, **only** the one he would have considered as **enemy** the day before, forever blurring the line between enemy and neighbor. It is precisely that element of surprise, by opening us to a channel of grace we never would have expected or even conceived, such as showing hospitality to an enemy, that allows God to help us on God's terms and not our own, tainted by our biases and attachments. The possibilities of God's revelation and the circle of God's love are expanded in our lives, such that we become freed from the bondage of our own narrow limits. It is the love of God alive within us that makes us compassion ready, so when a critical situation occurs it spontaneously triggers us into action. It is not a strenuous act of the will, but an automatic act of cooperation resulting from the river of mercy already flowing within us. **It** happens and we happen with **it**. And because we have received this love and reject any preconceived human, cultural, or religious strictures and structures, we recognize that since every human being is in desperate need of God's mercy, deserving or undeserving labels are meaningless, and through Jesus the compassionate love of God is extended to **all** people, with **all** margins erased. Authentic love pays no attention to religious, ethnic, sexual, or cultural distinctions. There are **no** boundaries as to who our neighbor is. Because the barrier between me and you has been removed so that the wounded person in the ditch **is** really **me**, compassion becomes that capacity for feeling what it is like to live in somebody else's skin and the realization that there can never be any peace and joy for **me**, until there is peace and joy for **you**. As the Dalai Lama of Tibet has written, "If you want **others** to be happy, practice compassion. If **you** want to be happy, practice compassion."

Because Jesus has been neighbor to us, we are enabled to see the world through his eyes and in gratitude for divine mercy having opened our hearts, we become people who treat everyone we encounter, however frightening, alien or hostile they may be, with the same vulnerability and kindness we've experienced. All we are asked to do, is to **be** in the world **who** God is. There are **no** Samaritans, Jews, or Christians. There are **only** those who cry out and those who pass by. We are called to be as compassionate as God, which means the dismantling of barriers that exclude and **like** the Samaritan, binding up wounds and taking those in need to a place of rest and safety. Martin Luther once commented "God has said, if you want to love and serve me, do it through your neighbors... **they** need your help. **I don't!**" But this lifelong process of recognizing we are continually in the ditch and God is our rescuer, occurs every Sunday as we receive Eucharist and are reminded of our dependence and sustenance on the compassion of God. I'm still both inspired and intimidated by the fearless example of Wesley Autrey, but each of us is called to travel our own unique faith journey process, not bolstered by human strength alone, but by the energetic guidance and patience of the Holy Spirit. Yes, to love our neighbor as oneself has no limits, but neither does God's mercy. So knowing Jesus **has** been and will **continue** to be the good Samaritan for each and every one of us, my sisters and brothers, how can **we** help **but** Go and do likewise!