

Sermon at St. John's - July 15, 2007

I would like to ask a question at the beginning of this sermon, and, then again, at its end: What must happen in each of our lives to make us want, urgently and deeply, to be loving, compassionate persons?

Many of you have heard - more than a few times - this gospel reading from Luke, the parable of The Good Samaritan. Some of you may be hearing it this morning for the first time. The parable, the part that begins, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers," is an inner story within an outer story. And while this inner story is one of the most well known parables attributed to Jesus, I think the outer story is the more important.

A man, called here a lawyer, a religious person, asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Is this person wanting to live forever? Possibly. But it's more likely that he wants to believe he is living the best, the most admirable and worthy life he can. Jesus asks by what standard does he live, and the man recites the Jewish commandments to love God fully, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus says simply "Yes!" But the man isn't satisfied. It's the part about the neighbor that bothers him. It sounds right, it's not complicated, but still - "Who is my neighbor?"

And so Jesus tells the Samaritan story. Which, it turns out, is not a direct answer after all - which is why it's called a parable. The idea of a parable is to make people think. Jesus poses his own question: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Now you and I might put our hands up and all but shout, "The Samaritan!" We would score highly. But the man in this outer story scores even higher when he answers, "The one who showed him mercy." For when Jesus says, "Go and do likewise," we realize that the whole point of the inner story is not to put down priests and Levites, or to exalt Samaritans. The point of the inner story is to raise the question of human need, and the question of human response to human need. Call that response mercy, call it charity, call it love - in summary, compassion.

All of us here are sympathetic to the reality of human need. And I am pretty sure that a compassionate response to human need gets our immediate approval. Compassion is not an exclusive Christian virtue; it is certainly an essential, human

virtue. But as one of the most loyal and insightful supporters of Samaritan Ministry, Bill Thompson, warns us: "Compassion isn't natural. People don't naturally gravitate toward sharing other peoples' pain." The question, then, is not whether we approve of compassion. Rather it is: What does it take to make us grab hold of a compassionate response to human need and cling to it as if our life, our eternal life, depended on it?

What must happen in our lives to make us respond in compassion to others? Respond, not because we are told to, or because we think it's the "right thing," but because we know in our bones that being compassionate is crucial to our self-respect, to our sense of worth, to our health as human beings?

I can't say what would have to happen in your lives. Only you can know or guess that. But I will tell you what once happened in my life.

I was a young husband and father, and my wife and I, and our two month old son, were on vacation in a little town in France, Claire's home country. Joining us for a week or two in our tiny rented place was Claire's mother. I remember that there was a lot of attention given to the baby, and long mother-daughter conversations. I came to look forward more and more eagerly to my afternoons off alone when I would go to a nearby cafe and read the daily French paper all the way through. This was, I told myself, the best way I could prepare myself for my up-coming new job as a French teacher back in a New England prep school.

One afternoon, as I was walking down to the cafe, I was stopped by a young Gypsy girl carrying a small child. "Please," she begged, "please, we are very hungry. Can you give us some money?" I looked at the two, at their eager-fearful faces and their bare feet and dirty clothes. I had some coins in my pocket. But giving them away might mean giving up a beer when I'd be reading my newspaper. "No, I'm sorry," I said, I don't have anything." And I continued on my way. When I settled in at the cafe I tried to give my attention to the latest news, but my thoughts were back with that Gypsy girl. Of course I'd lied to her - I could have spared something. But I knew I'd also fled from her need. Actually I was fleeing from all need. Was I, had I become, that insensitive? I'd thought I was preparing myself. with all my newspaper reading, to be a kind of authority on French culture - something that would serve my new young students well. But this Gypsy girl and the child, they were French culture come straight to me, and I had brushed them off. Was I so incapable of feeling?

This turned my thoughts back to my wife and child and mother-in-law. Why was I so anxious to get away from them? They certainly did not want me to go off alone. Claire even asked that morning if I would take an afternoon walk with them. But I'd begun to feel like an outsider, like I wasn't really needed. It was our baby who was the center of attention, he was all Claire and her mother seemed to want to talk or think about. For the first time I realized that I resented the whole situation - and that seemed to include not only my mother-in-law, but my wife and even my little son. Had it really come to this? Had I had lost the ability to love, to be compassionate? Not just to strangers asking for help, but to those persons closest to me? Suddenly and acutely I was in despair.

I left the cafe abruptly and went back to where I had last seen the Gypsy girl. She wasn't there. I walked up a side street, and down another. No luck. I asked a street vendor if he had seen the Gypsy girl with the small child. No. I was stumped. How could I find a way to prove that I wasn't the hard-hearted person I feared I'd become?

There was a little church a block away. I'd visited it once for its quaintness. Now I took myself there, to this empty Catholic chapel, and sat alone in its quiet and coolness. I prayed that my ability to love, to be a loving person, would be restored. I prayed that my heart would once again be filled with warmth toward others, especially toward those who wanted and needed my love. And I told myself, and perhaps I told God, that I would not leave this church until I knew I could be loving again.

For well more than a half hour I sat there on a wooden chair. I became conscious of the light falling in from small windows. I felt the presence of silence which became more and more friendly as I meditated without any specific thoughts. Finally I remember beginning to feel at peace, my inner despair seemingly having exhausted itself. I heard no outer or inner voice, no personal message; but I did feel a kind of buoyancy, an enthusiasm, an urgency to get moving.

I left the church, heading in the direction of where I knew my little family was taking the afternoon walk. As I hurried along out of the village I noticed the tall trees whose upper branches were swaying in the breeze. I almost felt I was moving with them. When I finally came upon my wife, her mother and the baby, I was elated. They were surprised and truly happy to have me with them. I felt like Scrooge on Christmas Day. It wasn't too late to be where I was needed. It wasn't too late to respond to others.

And so: What might or what must happen in our lives to make us want, urgently and deeply, to be loving, compassionate persons? It's a good question, one worth asking ourselves again and again. This is not to ask: How might we all become Good Samaritans? Or how might we respond positively to panhandlers, Gypsy girls, or whomever? Jesus didn't tell his parable for that purpose. But he did want us to see that this particular Samaritan was a merciful, compassionate being. And if seeing that moves us inside, if it helps us know in our bones that being such a person is crucial to our self-respect, to our sense of worth, to our health as human beings - and, therefore, to our eternal life - then we will have heard Jesus, and we will have honored him. Amen