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Commentary on the Gospel: The Good Samaritan

Gospel for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle C), and commentary.

Gospel (*Lk 10:25-37*)

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?”

And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.”

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and

bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

He said, "The one who showed mercy on him."

And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

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Commentary

The conversation between Jesus and this expert in the law is a good example of the type of dialogue habitual among the teachers of

Israel. Jesus doesn't answer his question directly, but rather asks him what reply he himself would give regarding what to do to inherit eternal life. The lawyer gives the right answer, combining a text from Deuteronomy on the primacy of love for God (cf. *Deut* 6:5), with a second text from Leviticus on love for one's neighbor (cf. *Lev* 19:18). He knew perfectly well the theoretical answer to the question he had asked Jesus, but his question isn't superfluous. Often knowledge of doctrine isn't sufficient, since difficulties arise regarding how to put it into practice. In this case, what needs to be clarified is who should be viewed as our "neighbor," and therefore as someone worthy of our love.

Jesus responds with a parable about a priest and a Levite who passed by a man in great need of help. But "a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him,

he had compassion” (v. 33). And he “went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back’” (vv. 34-35).

Love has to be shown in a visible and tangible way. It requires concrete deeds that help remedy the specific needs of one’s neighbor. On finishing the parable, Jesus asks the lawyer: “Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed mercy on him’” (vv. 36-37).

Jesus’ question isn’t “innocent.” In the language of the Old Testament, one’s “neighbor” (in Hebrew, “re’a”)

is not any human being, but rather only someone who belongs to one's own people. The priest and the Levite certainly belonged. But none of his contemporaries would have seen the Samaritan as "neighbor." Jesus challenges his interlocutor by asking him "which of these three" proved to be a neighbor of that wounded man. The expert in the law doesn't want to admit the obvious truth that the Samaritan was the true neighbor, because this seemed unthinkable for him. So he uses a circumlocution: "The one who showed mercy on him."

"The relevance of the parable today is evident," Benedict XVI said. "Aren't we surrounded by people who have been robbed and battered? The victims of drugs, of human trafficking, of sex tourism, inwardly devastated people who sit empty in the midst of material abundance. All this is of concern to us; it calls us to

have the eye and the heart of a neighbor, and to have the courage to love our neighbor.”[1]

Jesus parable is provocative. In practice, who was “the one who showed mercy on him”? The Samaritan, certainly, was a true neighbor to that injured man, but so was the innkeeper. He took it upon himself to spend many days caring for him until his wounds healed, preparing tasty meals for him and helping him to recover his strength. He served the injured man quietly, without drawing attention to himself. As Pope Francis said: “Love, after all, can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete: intentions, attitudes, and behaviors that are shown in daily living.”[2]

[1] Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (Doubleday, 2007), pp. 198-199.

[2] Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, no. 9.

Francisco Varo

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