

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time - C

We all know the story of the Good Samaritan. What we might overlook, though, is the context in which the story is told.

Actually, the context is interesting, and points out some dimensions of the issue that are familiar to all of us.

The passage starts out with a scholar of the law coming up to Jesus, looking for an argument. That's what scholars of the law did—they argued; not to be mean, or anything, but from the belief that arguing a point was a good way to get to the truth.

The better the argument, the more likely a point of view had of being true.

I like how Jesus responds. He gets the scholar of the law to go first: "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"

The scholar responds with a pretty good answer:

*"You shall love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
with all your being,
with all your strength,
and with all your mind,
and your neighbor as yourself."*

In fact, every devout Jew would immediately recognize this response as the prayer each of them was called upon to pray every day. It was as common to them as the sign of the cross is to us.

Jesus has no argument with that. How could he?

So far in the story there is really not much dramatic tension. That does not come into play until the scholar of the law tries to stir things up: "And who is my neighbor?"

In response Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Still, he's not getting into an argument.

Then comes the kicker: He asks the scholar of the law to make a judgment about who is neighbor in the story.

It's not a difficult question to answer.

And that is the point Jesus is satisfied to make.

Rather than splitting hairs about fine points of the law, Jesus would rather have the scholar focus on what was common knowledge.

"Everybody knows that."

Upon hearing the story of the Good Samaritan even kids in kindergarten can come up with the right answer.

In the first reading Moses reminds the people of Israel,

"For this command that I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you....

No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out."

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Knowing is not the hard part. The hard part comes with putting what we already know into action.

Here's a story written by a woman Anglican minister that illustrates the point:

This minister was preparing a sermon on this Gospel passage. While driving to work, she was mulling it over in her mind, only to come upon a car stopped by the side of the road.

As she approached, a tall black man stepped into the road, holding a pair of jumper cables and looking her straight in the eye.

A whole list of thoughts ran through her head at once:

- *The man needs help*
- *I'm a single white woman alone in my car*
- *The man needs help*
- *Never open your door to a stranger.*
- *Go to the nearest service station and send a mechanic*
- *The man needs help*
- *What if he can't afford a mechanic?*
- *The man needs help*
- *I'm sorry, I can't help.*
- *Maybe the next person will help.*

I have no intention of passing judgment on the woman for not stopping. I have no room to talk.

I actually don't even want to get into an argument about whether she should have stopped or not.

The issue for me really is much simpler. Even if I take away those situations where reaching out may not be a good idea, there are plenty of times when I don't help not because it would be risky to do so, but simply because it would be inconvenient.

Maybe we should start there. We all know enough. That's never actually been the problem.

The problem is not in the knowing, but in the doing.

Some situations are beyond our ability to help. But a lot more are not. Let's start with the ones that are already clearly within our ability and we will still be able to do a lot of good that otherwise goes undone.

Jesus did not want to debate with the scholar of the law. He wanted to get him to put aside the arguments and simply act. "Just do it!" as the ad says.

Not a bad bit of advice when it comes to following in the footsteps of Jesus.