

3.24.2024 Palm Sunday (St. Matthew 27:1-54)

When a certain lawyer asked Jesus, “*Who is my neighbor?*” (Luke 10:29), our Lord answered his question by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a familiar story about a Jewish man who traveled “*from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way...*” One of the Jewish traveler’s own people. “*... and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite...*” Again, one of his own countrymen. “*... when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan...*” The enemy. The outsider. “*... as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him*” (Luke 10:30-34).

Jesus told this parable to answer the question: *Who is my neighbor?* He wanted to encourage this lawyer, the other people who heard Him speak that day, and every one of us, to tear down the walls that we so often build between “us” and “them,” the insiders and the outsiders. He wanted His followers to share the love of God without discrimination. Like the Good Samaritan, to compassionately bind up wounds, to do all we can, by the grace of God, to partner with our Lord in His work of healing this broken world.

God has, as we so often pray, has “made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the whole earth, and didst send thy blessed Son to preach peace to them that are far off and to them that are nigh.” It is as Jesus declared, “*God so loved the world...*” (John 3:16). God loves without discrimination, He “*has poured out His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit*” (Romans 5:5), and now His desire is for us to share that Divine love with “*every nation and tribe and people and tongue*” (Revelation 7:9), each and every neighbor, for whom He gave the life of His Son to save.

This is the primary message presented to us in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, but there’s an important aspect of this story that parallels our Gospel reading today, one that I would ask you to consider. In the parable, the people of God (the wounded Jewish traveler, the priest, and the Levite)

stand in sharp contrast to the outsider, the Samaritan, and as Jesus told this story, His Jewish audience would be troubled not only because it was the Samaritan of all people who showed compassion by caring for the stripped, beaten, half dead Jewish traveler, but they would also find it very disturbing that the holiest of their people, a priest and a Levite, would be portrayed as men who saw this wounded traveler and chose to pass by on the other side.

From a first century Jewish perspective, this parable calls us not only to love without discrimination, but also teaches us that when the people of God refuse to love their neighbor, when they choose to pass by on the other side, God will use the stranger to love and to minister and to care for the broken and the wounded. The people of God, a priest and a Levite, were given the opportunity by God to love this man, but because they refused and the need remained, God sent a stranger to intervene.

With or without our help, God will manifest the depth of His love for those in need, the poor and the destitute, the despised and the forgotten - perhaps often in ways known only to them. This is a truth we also recognize in the Gospel passage we read today - St. Matthew's account of the Passion of our Lord. On the night Jesus was betrayed, He called His disciples *friends* (John 15:15), yet when you read through the text of this Gospel, which describes the very next day, the absence of our Lord's *friends* is striking. The only one of the twelve mentioned in Matthew's account is Judas, the betrayer, who cried out, "*I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood*" (Matthew 27:4).

St. Matthew described the *Via Dolorosa*, the Way of Suffering, the path our Lord walked that ended on the Cross at Calvary, and in his account Matthew wrote not only about Judas, but also of others who were no friend to our Lord. He wrote about the chief priests and elders who "*took counsel against Jesus*" (27:1), who formulated a plan to have Him put to death. He wrote about Pilate, who found no fault in Him, who washed his hands and claimed, "*I am innocent of the blood of this just person...*" (27:24), yet it was Pilate who condemned our Lord to death. In Matthew's account we read about Barabbas, who was to be crucified for insurrection and murder (Luke 23:19), but gladly gave up his cross so that our Lord could be nailed to it. In this text we also read about the multitude who cried out, "*Let Him be crucified!*"

(27:22-23), the Roman soldiers and the thieves who mocked our Lord (27:27-31,44), and the Centurion who was in command of these soldiers, who witnessed all things, "*feared greatly,*" and in the end after seeing everything testified, "*Truly this was the Son of God*" (27:54).

In Matthew's account of the Passion of our Lord, all of these people are named, but the *friends* of Jesus are absent. Like the priest and the Levite, they've passed by on the other side, and therefore, just as He did in the parable, God intervened through a stranger. He loved and cared for His Son, the stripped, beaten, half dead Jewish Traveler, who "*for the joy that was set before Him*" (Hebrews 12:2) journeyed toward Calvary, that He may be lifted up, "*just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*" (John 3:14), to the end that the world may see, and be drawn to the "*Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*" (Revelation 13:8).

Our Lord's goal, His *joy*, was the Cross on Calvary, and when His broken body could go no further, God helped Him accomplish this sacrificial journey through Simon of Cyrene, a man described as one who was "*passing by on his way in from the country... him they compelled to carry His cross*" (Mark 15:21; Matthew 27:32). When the friends of our Lord were absent, Providence brought Simon to this place, where God pressed him into service. Providence brought someone who was outside the story, placed him inside the story, and Holy Scripture will forever provide us with this account of Simon of Cyrene being the first person to take up the Cross of Christ and follow our Lord.

Jesus said, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me*" (Matthew 16:24), and when we bring to mind the image of Simon of Cyrene taking up our Lord's Cross and following Him to Calvary, we can reasonably conclude that Jesus gave us this difficult command to take up our cross because it is in doing so that we find intimacy with Him. On the path to Calvary was anyone closer to our Lord than Simon of Cyrene?

When the people of God choose to pass by on the other side, when the friends of our Lord scatter, God accomplishes His will without us, and the opportunity for intimacy with Him passes us by, but when we choose to deny

ourselves, take up our cross, and love and minister and care for the broken and the wounded, we actually find Christ there, at the Cross, for the Lord is always “*near to the broken-hearted*” (Psalm 34:18). My friends, Jesus is at the Cross. By the grace of God, may we never miss an opportunity to meet Him there.