

The Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 30:10-14
<i>Response</i>	Turn to the Lord in your need, and you will live.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 69:14, 17, 30-31, 33-34, 36, 37
<i>Second Reading</i>	Colossians 1:15-20
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life; you have the words of everlasting life.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 10:25-37

The 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time brings us one of the most famous parables from the Gospel of Luke. It's the parable of the Good Samaritan. This is one of those parables that's only present in the Gospel of Luke. If we didn't have Luke, we wouldn't know about it. It's also one of the most beloved of Jesus' parables. So the gospel reading for today is focused on that one, but it puts it in the context of a question from a lawyer to Jesus about what he must do to inherit eternal life. So, it's very important to see that there's a wider context for the parable and the Church gives us both the parable and it's broader context in today's gospel. So let's turn to Luke 10 and we'll look at the parable of the Good Samaritan, but we'll look at it in the context of the question that lead to it. In Luke 10:25-37 we read these words:

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 Samari-

tan, 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."¹

Alright, what a great passage, we have to thank Luke for giving us this one, there's so much here. Okay, let's just walk through it together. The first thing I want to clarify is that in the Revised Standard Version it says that a lawyer stood up to test him. The Greek word there is *nomikos*, it literally means a scholar of the law or a doctor of the law. The Greek word for law is *nomos*, so you can hear the similarity, *nomikos / nomos*. And by "the law" there, it means the *Torah*, the Hebrew law, the Jewish scriptures, in particular the first 5 books of the law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy; the Pentateuch). So, in other words, this guy is a biblical scholar basically. So he's an expert in the Jewish scriptures and he's a professional teacher of the law and he puts Jesus to the test, because who is Jesus? He's just a carpenter from Galilee, right? All these people are following Jesus. Jesus is teaching them about the scriptures. He's teaching them how to live, and so this professional biblical scholar asks Jesus a question, not because he's actually interested in the answer, but because he is trying to test Jesus to see what Jesus knows. Now I know it's hard to imagine professors and academics being kind of arrogant and asking questions that aren't really designed to find the truth, that are just to show off how much they know and make other people look stupid, but it happened in the ancient times in the 1st Century. Just try to imagine it for a little bit.

So anyway, this kind of arrogant teacher here wants to put Jesus to the test, see what he knows and he says "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus flips it right around back on him when he says "Well, what's written in the law? What do you read?" or "how do you read?" Now that's an interesting point. What does it mean, "How do you read?" Well it's critical to remember that the interpretation of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

the *Torah* (of the law, of the scriptures), was hotly debated by scholars in the 1st Century as today. Sometimes my students will get aggravated with me when they say, “What does this passage mean?” And I’ll say, “Well, it’s debated.” Oh, yeah, another debated passage. Some people say this, some people this, some scholars think that, some Fathers think that. Why? Because human language is open to different interpretations, and this is especially true in the Hebrew text, because in the Hebrew text there were no vowels written into the Hebrew language. Ancient Hebrew was unpunctuated without vowels, so it would just be a series of consonants. So literally, you could have a debate about how to interpret a passage based on the way you read it. In other words, did you think that certain vowels should be inserted into this text making it mean a certain word, or other vowels. You could literally read the text out loud in different ways. So how a person reads a text is a very technical way of saying, “How do you interpret it?”

So Jesus is speaking to this doctor of the law in the language of ancient Jewish scholarship and ancient Jewish interpretation of the *Torah*. And so the lawyer, the doctor of law, he responds to Jesus by quoting two Old Testament texts. He says “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and then love your neighbor as yourself.” Now, I like this passage because it shows that those two commandments (the love of God and the love of neighbor) are not something that Jesus made up. Sometimes Christians will kind of assume that the two greatest commandments, being the love of God and the love of neighbor, was like a novelty; this was something Jesus came up with. It’s not, it’s part of ancient Judaism. It was in the core of the Old Testament, it’s in the Pentateuch. The commandment to love God with all your heart and soul and mind is from Deuteronomy 6. This is a basic Jewish prayer that is said several times a day. It’s called the *Shema*, from the Hebrew word “hear”. “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. The second commandment, “love your neighbor as yourself” is from Leviticus 19, in which it says “you should love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now watch, this is important. In context, the question is “Well, what does it mean when it says love your neighbor? Who does the category of ‘neighbor’ include?” If you go back to Leviticus 19:18, the verse that is quoted by the doctor of the law here is the 2nd half of the verse: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you back up and read the whole verse, listen to what it says: “You shall not take vengeance or bare any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” That’s Leviticus 19:18. So notice

there, in context, does neighbor simply mean “the sons of your own people”? In other words, fellow Israelites. It could be interpreted in an inclusive way, meaning anyone who is a neighbor to you, or it could also be interpreted exclusively as saying, “The only neighbor who I have to love as myself are the sons of my own people.” So there is an ambiguity there and if you read the whole text in its even broader context, it mentions your servants, it mentions the deaf, it mentions the blind, it mentions the poor and the great, and so there’s this whole question that arises: “Exactly who is my neighbor in context? Is it just the sons of my own people or is it broader than that?” And so in that context, back up to the gospel and you can understand, the lawyer here, the doctor of law, appears to be asking Jesus in a sense, “What’s your take on the exact meaning of who my neighbor is?” And so Jesus responds to that question (Who is my neighbor?) with the parable of the Good Samaritan. So I hope you can already see how Jesus is answering a specific exegetical question about the love of neighbor from the book of Leviticus by means of this parable of the Good Samaritan.

So in the parable of the Good Samaritan, as we just saw, there are three categories of people mentioned. First, the story is set: a man’s going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and he gets beset by robbers who strip him and beat him and leave him half dead. In context, that person seems to be a Jew because he is going down from Jerusalem, which is the capital of the Jewish people (where the Temple is), back down to Jericho, which is also a Jewish city. But on the way he is waylaid by some robbers who strip him and beat him. Now by chance, three other people see him on the road, 3 categories: The first is a priest. Now, when you say the word priest in our context, you think of a Catholic priest (that’s a predominant connotation), but in this context it would have been a Jewish priest. Now a Jewish priest in the 1st Century A.D. by definition would be a descendant of Aaron, and he would be an official in the Temple. So his job would be to be ordained to offer sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple. The second person mentioned is a Levite. Now most of us kind of confuse priests and Levites with one another, but it’s important to remember that there was a distinction here. A Levite was different than a priest because although he belonged to the same tribe as the priest — all the priests were from the tribe of Levi — a Levite wasn’t a member of Aaron’s specific family. So he could minister in the Temple, he would assist the priest with the offering of sacrifice, like the cleaning of the implements and stoking the fire on the altar and that kind of stuff, but what he couldn’t do was actually pour out the blood of the sacrifice, and he couldn’t go into the Holy Place to offer the incense in the Temple, like Zechariah does in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. So all priests are Levites but not all

Levites are priests (if that helps you make that distinction there). So as a descendant of Levi, he's an assistant in the Temple — It's kind of like the similarity between a deacon and a priest today. A Deacon assists at the Mass, but he doesn't offer the sacrifice of the Mass. You have to be an ordained priest to do that.

So, the priest comes by and a Levite comes by, and they both pass by the man on the side of the road. Then the third category person here, the Samaritan, not only isn't a member of that priestly tribe, he isn't even an Israelite. He is a Samaritan who is outside of the people of Israel, because the Samaritans were descendants of the Assyrian conquerors, who in the 8th Century B.C. came into the Northern kingdom of Israel, exiled the 10 Northern tribes of Israel, took over the land of Samaria in the Northern kingdom, and set up their own alternative temple at Mt. Gerizim, their own alternative cult where they're offering sacrifice to the God of Israel, but they're doing it outside of the covenant. They went on to be, as I've mentioned in other videos, hated by the Jewish people because they were seen as usurpers of the Northern kingdom, half or even non-Israelite, in the sense that they are descended from pagans who mixed with Israelites that were left in the land, and also as competitors with the Jewish Temple. And by the time we get to the 1st Century A.D., there's a real irony here because Josephus tells us that one of the reasons the Samaritans were hated by the Jewish people was because there was one incident in the 1st Century where some Samaritans waylaid some Jews on the way to the Temple. Some Jewish pilgrims were going down for Passover and the Samaritans, when the Jews passed through their territory, laid and waited for them, ambushed them, and murdered them. Josephus, who's a 1st Century historian, tells us about this.

So you can't help but wonder, there's a little bit of irony here in Luke's account in chapter 9 because in this case, it's not a Samaritan lying in wait for a Jew, but rather it's a Jew who's been injured on the side of the road who is then helped by a Samaritan. So I think I brought this up in other videos before, but in the parables of Jesus, these are not just like simple stories that "even children can understand the kingdom." No, they are riddles, there's always a twist in the parables of Jesus and here the twist comes when this Samaritan, who you would expect to be hated and even feared by Jesus' Jewish audience, is the one who turns around and shows compassion and shows mercy to this man who's been waylaid by robbers on the way to Jericho.

So these are the 3 categories: priest, Levite, Samaritan. And you can even think here too of how, even to this day, in jokes that are passed orally, there's usually three characters, three individuals, and the punch line usually comes with not the first, not the second, but what? The third. So there's a kind of punch with the third here. A priest, who knows the law, sees his own brother, right, a Jewish man laying by the side of the road and passes him by, doesn't do anything to help. A Levite, who would also be expected to know the law, right, because in the book of Nehemiah, the Levites explain the law (or is it as Esra? It's one of the two: Esra and Nehemia) to the people when they're preaching from the law, and so you expect the Levite to know the law and to know that this man is his neighbor, but he passes him by. But then the Samaritan, who by the way has the law (they have the 5 books of Moses) but who isn't regarded a real Jew or a real Israelite, and who's even hated by the Jews, he's the one who ministers to this man and brings him to an inn. He doesn't just take care of him, but gives his own money to the innkeeper and says, "whatever expenses accrue, bring this man back to health and then charge them to me and I'll pay them when I get back." Ok, so Jesus says to the lawyer, "which of the men was his neighbor?" And the lawyer answers rightly, "the one who showed mercy."

Ok. So what's going on this parable? The first thing I want to say is, I want to say what the parable is not about, and then I want to say what it is about. It has become popular in contemporary times to say (and I've heard this preached before) that the reason the priest and the Levite avoid the man is because they think he is dead and they think he's a corpse. Now it is true that Luke says that the robbers left him half dead. So that means he's severely beaten on the side of the road, probably unconscious (right?) if he's half dead. He's been beaten, very, very severely. However, Luke never says that the reason the priest and the Levite won't touch him is because they think he is a corpse. That's something that has to be read into the text. Now it is true in the book of Leviticus 21:1-3, that to come into contact with a corpse would be considered ritually defiling. That's true. So for example, if you were going up to the Temple to offer sacrifice and you inadvertently touched a corpse, it would render you impure and you wouldn't be able to go into the Temple to offer sacrifice. In fact (I mentioned this in another video), Josephus tells us that in one Passover in the 1st Century, the Samaritans stole into the Temple at Passover, some Samaritans snuck in, and they put human bones in the Temple during the feast. Why? Well because human bones would defile everyone going into the Temple offering at Passover. So it was a way of ritually defiling everyone involved in

the Temple and defiling the sacred space itself. It's one of the reasons the Jews didn't like the Samaritans.

So that's true. However (this is really crucial), in the parable, the man is not going up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice; he's coming down from Jerusalem. So the only time you would have to avoid contact with a corpse is if you were going into the Temple in order to offer sacrifice. This would be true even for priests. And even more importantly, the burial of a corpse of someone who is dead was considered a commandment that was a grave obligation on every Jewish person. We know this from ancient Jewish tradition. I've probably quoted the Mishnah before in these videos. The Mishnah is an ancient compilation of traditions of that rabbis. It was written down around 200 A.D., but it gives lots of traditions that go all the way back to the time of Jesus, and even to the 1st Century B.C. And in the Mishnah, listen what it says about the Jewish obligation to bury a corpse. In Mishnah *Nazir* 7:1 we read these words:

A High Priest or Nazirite may not contract uncleanness because of their [dead] kindred, but *they may contract uncleanness because of a neglected corpse.*

So notice what the rabbis are saying there. The Mishnah's saying that although ordinarily a priest would not be able to contract a ritual impurity if one of their relatives died (and they were having to go and serve in the Temple), however, the obligation to bury the dead would transcend the ritual purity law if it were a case of a neglected corpse. In other words, if you find a dead person on the side of the road you have an obligation to bury him, whether you are a priest or a Levite. The obligation to bury the dead (the moral obligation in other words) trumps the ritual obligation of remaining free from corpse defilement. So the point is, even if the priest or the Levite thought the dead man were a corpse, it's not as if Jewish law or Jewish ritual purity rules were so strict that if they saw a corpse they would just leave it out there to be eaten by the birds. To the contrary, according to ancient Jewish tradition itself, the moral obligation to bury a dead person was a greater obligation than the obligation of ritual purity. So even if the priest or Levite thought it was a corpse they would have been obligated in the 1st Century setting to bury it. But the point is, Luke doesn't give any indication that that's actually what's going on here. We just don't know that for a fact. Jesus' points seems much more focused on the theme not of ritual purity, but of mercy, compassion and love of neighbor. That's what their debating. What does love of neighbor look like? And

in this context, Jesus is really clear and the lawyer gets it right. The doctor of the law gets it right. When Jesus says, “Which of the one proved neighbor to the man?” The lawyer responds, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

Now the Greek word here for mercy, *eleos*, is a very important theme in the Gospel of Luke. Some people even call the Gospel of Luke *the Gospel of mercy* because Jesus is constantly emphasizing that we have to have compassion on others. The best example of this is from the Sermon on the Plain, where Jesus says “be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful”, which in context means “love your enemies.” Jesus juxtaposes love of enemies with compassion. Now in that case, and in that context, with sermon in the background of this statement, what is Jesus teaching this doctor of the law? He’s answering his question, in other words, his own question, “How do you interpret Leviticus 19? Does Leviticus 19 just mean I love my fellow Israelites? Or does it mean that I love my enemies?” And Jesus is very clear here that the Samaritan who shows compassion to this Jew who’s come down on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho shows the higher mercy. He’s “loving his neighbor” like God the Father loves humanity. He’s loving even those who, according to standard of this day, would be considered his enemy (or his enemies). The Samaritan shows mercy.

So that’s the basic upshot of the parable. If you go back to the Old Testament today, the reading is from Deuteronomy 30:10-14, and this is what the first reading says. It’s about, can we actually obey the commandments:

If you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. “For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

So why is this reading chosen for today? I think here that the juxtaposition is not typological but moral. In other words, the 1st reading is meant to lead us into the gospel to show us that the love of enemies that Jesus is commanding us, showing compassion towards our enemies, praying for those who we might not like or who

might have enmity towards us, doing good to those who hate us (as the Good Samaritan does to the man who was waylaid by the robbers, that's not impossible. Sometimes it might feel impossible. How can Jesus expect me to love my enemies? Well, it's because he's not asking you to feel good about your enemies. He's asking you to do good to your enemies. That's what the Good Samaritan does. That's why we call him the Good Samaritan. We don't know how he felt about the man, but we know that he showed love to the man when he showed compassion and mercy on him, cared for him, poured oil on his wounds and paid money (actually sacrificed his own possessions) in order to love his neighbor as himself.

In closing then, two quotes. One from The Catechism about what this looks like. In paragraph 1825 it says this about the kind of compassion Jesus is calling us to.

Christ died out of love for us, while we were still “enemies” (Rom 5:10). The Lord asks us to love as he does, even our *enemies*, to make ourselves the neighbor of those farthest away, and to love children and the poor as Christ himself. (CCC 1825)

So if we were to ask today, “What does it mean to love my neighbor?” In answer, the Good Samaritan tells us it means “to love your enemies, even as Christ loved us.” Which brings me in closing, finally, to a quote from St. Augustine. In one of his sermons, Sermon 171, Augustine gave us a very famous allegorical interpretation of the parable. Everything I've just told you is primarily what scholars would refer to as the “literal sense of the parable”. “What does Jesus mean in context? What does Luke mean in context?” But the Church Fathers loved to take this parable and run with it, and what they did was an allegorical reading of it in which the Good Samaritan is Christ and the man who was stripped and beaten is humanity. So I'll just end with this last reading. This was St. Augustine (4th Century):

“The whole human race, you see, is that man who was lying on the road, left there by bandits half dead, who was ignored by the passing priest and Levite, while the passing Samaritan stopped by him to take care of him and help him.... In this Samaritan the Lord Jesus Christ wanted us to understand himself.”²

In any case, what Augustine is saying here is quite beautiful. What he is saying is, “At the end of the day, Jesus is the one who shows us what true love of neighbor

² Augustine, *Sermons* 171.2; trans. E. Hill, cited in Gadenz, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 213

looks like, when he goes to Calvary for our sake, so that he might save us from sin and death and restore us to new life.” Through our sin, humanity itself has become like the man half dead on the road, and Christ, through the sacraments, pours oil and wine into our wounds and washes us, makes us clean, and makes us whole, and through his charity towards us, through for his compassion for humanity, restores us to life and shows us what it really means to love our neighbor as ourselves.