

Who is My Neighbor?
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A neighbor is one who is near, or one who draws near. We use the word primarily to mean geographical nearness: the people who live near my home; the people who sit near me in a classroom; countries that border my country. To the Israelite in Jesus' time, however, the word was used more broadly. In the Old Testament, 'neighbor', πλησίον in Greek, refers almost exclusively to kinsmen, i.e., to fellow Jews. This is not so much a spatial nearness as it is an ethnic and religious nearness.

It would have been this broader sense of the word 'neighbor' that a lawyer, a teacher of the law, had in mind when he asked Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?" (Lk 10:29). In reply, Jesus offers the well known parable of the Good Samaritan:

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.' (Lk 10:30-35)

Jesus proceeds to ask the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" (Lk 10:36). The subtle and profound twist which Jesus offers in response to the lawyer's inquiry requires him, in order to answer Jesus' question, to put himself in the place of the injured man, the man left half dead. Only that person is in a position to answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" His neighbor is the one who comes to his aid in a time of need.

In this way, the parable asks all of us to view ourselves as wounded, even mortally wounded, awaiting our death. What are these wounds? Who are those who have afflicted us, and brought us to the place of destruction. Hear the words that we sing during the fifth week of Great Lent:

Like the man who fell among thieves and was wounded, I have also fallen because of my sins, and my soul has been wounded. To whom shall I fly for healing, but to Thee, Physician of souls and bodies? Pour out upon me Thy great Mercy, O God. (Aposticha of Vespers, Monday of the fifth week; *The Lenten Triodion Supplement*, p. 243).

This interpretation, which is developed by many of the Holy Fathers east and west (e.g., Sts. John Chrysostom and Ambrose), is repeatedly expressed in the hymns of the fifth week of

Great Lent, describing our enemies and afflictions variously as our sins, disobedience, passions, thoughts, and lusts. Sometimes the robbers are described as demons masquerading as angels of light or as bodiless thieves. What wounds us? Our envy and anger, our self-justification and vainglory, our anxieties and fears, our gluttony and greed, our lusts and laziness, our gossip and judgmentalness. King David aptly describes our state in one of the Six Psalms that are said every morning in Matins:

My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness; I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. Lord, all my longing is known to thee, my sighing is not hidden from thee. My heart throbs, my strength fails me; and the light of my eyes — it also has gone from me. My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my kinsmen stand afar off. (Ps 38:5-11).

Sin tortures every aspect of our being including the physical effects David describes here. Our wounds are self-inflicted, but we are not able to heal ourselves.

If we see ourselves as the man left half-dead in our Lord's parable, then who is the Good Samaritan? Who will draw near to us? Who will bind our wounds, take us to safety, and provide for our long term rehabilitation? "To whom shall I fly for healing," as we read in the above Lenten hymn, "but to Thee, Physician of souls and bodies? Pour out upon me Thy great Mercy, O God." Christ Himself is our Physician; He is the Samaritan who alone can be called good, and who alone is able to draw near to us with genuine healing grace. He doesn't avoid us; we are not a bothersome interruption to His more important business; He is not afraid to enter our foul and festering condition.

So often the Holy Gospels record scenes parallel to this parable: the blind man on the road to Jericho (Lk 18:5), the ten lepers who stood at a distance (Lk 17:12), Zacchaeus the Publican of short stature (Lk 19:2), the woman with the flow of blood (Mk 5:25). All these and many more found themselves along Jesus' route as He traveled from place to place, and what did they do? They dared to cry out; they dared to climb a tree; they dared to touch the hem of his garment. They dared to forget about themselves, their own ego, what others will think of them, so that they could focus solely on the One who alone could heal them. And so too, we must lay aside every earthly care and with them cry out, "Lord, Jesus, Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

When we are helped in time of need, we are naturally grateful, often in proportion to the difficulties we faced. As St Ambrose notes, "since none is closer than He Who tended our wounds, let us love Him as our Lord, let us also love Him as our Neighbour" (*Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to St. Luke*, VII § 84). On one occasion our Lord was invited over to Simon the Pharisee's home to dine. "A sinful woman" came and started to wash Jesus feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Simon was thinking that if Jesus was a prophet He would

know the sort of woman who was touching Him, the implication being, of course, that if He did know He certainly would not let her touch Him. Jesus, being aware of Simon's thoughts, initiates the following dialogue:

"Simon, I have something to say to you." And [Simon] answered, "What is it, Teacher?" "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." (Lk 7:40-48)

So often we want to be like Simon the Pharisee--pretending that we are healthy, that our sins are few and of small consequence. The sad result is that even though we are dining with Jesus, we won't let Him draw near to us. It seems that even He cannot prove to be our neighbor if we push Him away. But the sinful woman was allowed to draw near to Jesus, to touch Him, and in granting this He proved to be her neighbor; to bring healing to her broken life. She was forgiven much not because she had committed more sins than Simon, but rather because she set aside all pretense while Simon retained his blinding air of superiority. She was willing to openly and humbly admit her sins while Simon could not even lower himself to properly provide for the needs of his invited guest. She loved our Lord much, but Simon loved Him little.

Our Lord comes to the aid of those who humble themselves, who admit their need for His healing presence to permeate their lives. As Saint Luke tells us, when the lawyer asked his question of Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?", he does so to "justify himself" (Lk 10:29). "Surely it will be obvious," he must have been thinking, "that no matter what definition of 'neighbor' Jesus provides it will reveal that I love my neighbor and thus fulfill that requirement of the law." But, as with Simon the Pharisee, this self-justification is simply the revelation of his myopic self-assurance that blocks the reception of God's merciful love.

If we turn now to the context which prompted the lawyer to ask Jesus about his neighbor, we'll see just how far reaching Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is.

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." (Lk 10:25-28)

Eternal life is given to those who love--to those who love God with their whole being and love their neighbor as themselves. We have already seen that the parable of the Good Samaritan reveals how our love for God arises from our willingness to see and experience ourselves as being wounded by our own sins, dying along the side of life's road with no one to help, crying out for Jesus to draw near and heal us. To love God with *all* our heart requires that we let him *heal all* our heart. To love God with all our soul and with all our strength and with all our mind requires that we let him heal the sinful wounds that pierce every facet of our being. For as we are healed and forgiven of much, so also we will love Him much.

What can we say, however, about love of neighbor? How does seeing ourselves as the wounded man aid us in loving our neighbor? Blessed Augustine says not only are we to see ourselves as the wounded one who has been brought by Christ to the inn (the Church), but also as the innkeeper. "We [as the Church] are performing the duties of the innkeeper. He was told, 'If you spend any more, I will pay you when I return.' If only we spent at least as much as we have received! However much we spend, brothers and sisters, it is the Lord's money" (Sermon 179A, 8). When Jesus sent his disciples out to preach He told them "freely you have received, freely give" (Mt 10:8). We cannot give what we have not received. By allowing ourselves to be healed by Christ, we are able to offer that healing to the injured and broken people we come across on our life's travels. This is the calling of the Church.

If we attempt to heal others with our own strength, even with the best that this world has to offer, we will be avoiding their truest and deepest needs, and in so doing we show ourselves to be like the priest and Levite passing by their true, spiritual suffering. It is for this reason, and in this way, that St. Paul exhorts the Church in Corinth: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor 1:3-4). God, in Christ Jesus, draws near to us in all our afflictions so that we may in turn comfort others "*with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted.*" This is a beautiful image. It is the image of Christ drawing near to us, proving Himself a neighbor to us, so that we might truly draw near to others and so prove to be their neighbor.

Who is my neighbor? My neighbor is Christ Himself. He alone draws near to the deepest recesses of my afflicted soul. And his healing touch is what moves me to love much, both Him with my whole being and others with the divine mercy that has been freely granted to me.