

RECEIVE MERCY

THE PARABLE *of the* GOOD SAMARITAN

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:29

Let me tell you the story of Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax, an immigrant who had come to America from Guatemala. We'll call him Hugo. On April 18, 2010, in New York City, a woman was being threatened by a man wielding a knife. Without hesitation, Hugo rushed to her aid and fought with the attacker, but in the struggle Hugo was stabbed and left to die on a street in Queens. As he lay bleeding, the woman and the attacker ran off in different directions. Surveillance cameras filmed portions of the attack and the disgusting events which followed. The cameras showed that one man photographed Hugo with his cell phone as Hugo lay dying. Eighteen others saw or walked right past him. All neglected to help him or even to contact authorities. The closest anyone came to assisting Hugo was a man who actually shook the body vigorously, but on seeing a pool of blood he walked away. Firefighters arrived fifteen minutes later. By then it was too late. Hugo had died.

How could they, we wonder. What would motivate such deliberate inaction?

We never live far from the parable Jesus told about a man beaten and left for dead on the dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho. In Jesus' story, too, there are passersby who might have stopped, but didn't. Kenneth Bailey, a New Testament scholar, knows the culture of the Middle East, ancient and current. In his book, *Through Peasant Eyes*, he explains why the priest and the Levite may have chosen not to help the wounded victim of violent crime.

By Bailey's reckoning, the man's injuries were such that the two religious leaders simply could not determine if their rules would allow them to help. He was stripped naked and beaten to the point of death, Jesus says. For the priest and the Levite, that meant that they couldn't tell if the man was Jewish by his clothing or by asking him. It was quite easy in Jesus' day to tell if someone was Jewish by the way they dressed. This man's clothes were gone. And "half-dead"

means he was at the very point of death. He probably could not speak. For all the priest knew, the man was dead, and there were strict rules about touching the dead. In other words, because they could not be sure that the man was one of their own and alive, both passed him by.

The priest and the Levite had just come from Jerusalem, probably returning home to Jericho after their two weeks of service. The priest doesn't even come near the wounded man, simply passing by. Jesus tells us that the Levite, though, actually first comes where the man lay and then passes by. He came close, but if the priest chose not to help the man, why would an underling question his wisdom and ethics and do otherwise? There are boundaries, after all, rules of engagement, rules so strong they go beyond emotions and the compassion necessary for action.

The whole story is told in response to a young expert on law and tradition out to test Jesus and play the crowd that followed him. How disturbing it must have been when Jesus identifies the one who helped the wounded man as "a Samaritan." Here is one hated by the Jews, who helps a Jewish man in crisis! Moved by compassion, he does all that is needed and more to be sure the man survives. Bailey comments that a Samaritan putting up a Jew in an inn, probably in Jericho, would be like a Plains Indian walking into Dodge City in 1875 with a scalped and wounded cowboy on his horse. Checking into a room atop a saloon and spending the night taking care of the cowboy, this Indian would be fortunate to get out of Dodge alive! Such was the courage of the Samaritan not only in stopping to save the man but in taking him to an inn to care for him.

For the young lawyer and for us, the parable is a lesson in the power of compassion to go beyond boundaries boundaries. If the question prompting the story was "Who is my neighbor?" the answer was "The very next person you meet, no matter what." The rules are broken, the fences come down, and prejudice dissipates when compassion wins.

Since the earliest days of the Church, listeners of Jesus' story have seen the Good

Samaritan as a Christ figure. We are the wounded and the dying. We are the broken and half-dead. As it often is with Jesus, he sees our need and is moved with compassion. He will pay dearly for his compassion. He acts willfully, decidedly, and we are rescued and cared for beyond anything we might have imagined. His mercy is extravagant! He is for us a living sacrifice. May we do the same the next time we see our neighbor in need. Amen.

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