

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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There could hardly be a more important gospel to be proclaimed in Christian churches on this sad, sad weekend than the one we just heard. We often, almost automatically describe this well-known parable of Jesus as that of the “Good Samaritan,” which is—as the Jewish scripture scholar Amy-Jill Levine puts it—a title that makes no sense at all, and threatens to completely cover over the deepest, most basic meaning of the story. Because for Jesus’ audience that day, there could have been virtually no such thing as a “Good Samaritan.” She likens it to speaking about a so-called “good murderer,” or “good rapist.” Those two words are commonly regarded as a simple contradiction in terms, which should be obvious from the fact that the very word “Good” is intended to distinguish the hero of our story from every other person of his race. Samaritans were not simply foreigners and immigrants (some of them were neither). No, they were known enemies to the Jewish people—known well enough to be hated as a group.

And so here we are in St. Paul at the end of a week that has exploded with violence, and rage, and threats of revenge and fear from people across racial divides. We *need* this gospel desperately today, and in order to understand why, we need it be clear about what Jesus intended it to mean, both then and now.

And its meaning is both astonishingly simple and desperately difficult to put into practice: i.e., those two first passers-by, the priest and the Levite, who discovered a half-dead man in a ditch on that road from Jerusalem to Jericho, were required by God to help him, and they didn’t. There is no excuse. None.

And the long Christian history of preaching and reflecting on this gospel has often gotten so caught up with the task of speculation about what it meant to be a priest or a Levite, or a Jew or a Samaritan, or dead or ritually impure, that this stark fact has tended to be papered over: They *had* to help him, and they failed. That’s it. Levine in her commentary on this gospel cites a sermon that the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached about it. He said this:

I am going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible these men were afraid...And so the first question that the priest and the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But then the Good Samaritan came by and he revised the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’

Later that same week, Dr. King went to Memphis to support the strike of the sanitation workers there and was assassinated.

The point is simple: It simply doesn’t matter who that bloodied, battered person is, and the question isn’t at all about me. It’s about what *God* requires and what our *neighbor—any* and every neighbor—deserves. That’s it. And it’s very, very hard.

And once we remember that, then the whole exchange between the lawyer and Jesus takes on a whole new clarity. Luke tells us that the question posed to Jesus was, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Even setting aside the fact that eternal life is God’s gift, rather than the result of anything I could ever hope to do to earn it, his is already a question motivated by “What’s going to happen to me?” And in response Jesus quotes the heart of Jewish faith, straight out of the Torah: Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself. It’s nothing that both of them didn’t already know very well. So the conversation should have ended there. But it didn’t.

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Instead, Luke tells us that the lawyer asked another bad question—bad because it was motivated by a wish to “justify himself.” It seems that the lawyer just didn’t get it—or didn’t *want* to. It was as if those ancient, sacred scriptural commands never happened. And that’s when the parable of the Good Samaritan comes forth. And as Jesus told it, it began with these words: “A man fell victim to robbers.” That’s it. “A man.” Not a man of any class, race, culture, religion, political party, level of charm or education or ability. Just a man. Because all the rest of that doesn’t matter. And then, probably just to rub it in, Jesus proposed the worst possible scenario for the lawyer to take in: He told him that the only one who did the right thing was the most despicable kind of hated enemy that he could imagine: A Samaritan. Amy-Jill Lavine concludes her reflection with an amazing analogy. This is what she writes:

“Samaria today has various names: The West Bank, Occupied Palestine, Greater Israel. To hear the parable today, we only need to update the identity of the figures. I am an Israeli Jew on my way from Jerusalem to Jericho, and I am attacked by thieves, beaten, stripped, robbed and left half-dead in a ditch. Two people who should have stopped to help pass me by: The first, a Jewish medic from the Israeli Defense Forces; the second, a member of the Israel-Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church USA. But the person who takes compassion on me and shows me mercy is a Palestinian Muslim whose sympathies lie with Hamas, a political party whose political charter not only anticipates Israel’s destruction, but also depicts Jews as subhuman demons responsible for all the world’s problems.

The parable of the “Good Hamas Member” might be difficult for people in support of Israel’s existence...Can we finally agree that it is better to acknowledge the humanity and the potential to do good in the enemy, rather than to choose death? Will we be able to care for our enemies, who are also our neighbors? Will we be able to bind up their wounds rather than blow up their cities? And can we imagine that they might do the same for us? Can we put into practice that inauguration promise of not leaving the wounded traveler on the road? The biblical text—and concern for humanity’s future—tell us we must.”

I hope that there is very little need to connect the dots here between that sentiment and what has been going on in our city and others this week. Can we dare to forget about ourselves enough to trust that we should not, and must not, fear and mistrust and hate other people so much that we are willing to shoot and kill the innocent, no matter who they are? And even if we *can’t* do that, could we dare to admit that it’s what God demands and our faith requires? If we cannot do that much, then we have no business being here now.

It really is just that simple, and just that hard to take in, and demanding of enormous faith. The Eucharist helps us, and helps us to help others. And do we ever need it now.