



## A PARABLE ABOUT ETHICS AND MORALS THAT SPEAKS TO US TODAY

All of us are very familiar with the parable of the *Good Samaritan* and we believe that its message is that our neighbor is the person in need, no matter what his background. And we would be right. But Fr. William Bausch offers us some fresh insights into a well-known story. He writes:

*Most likely, for more years than we'd like to count, we've heard this Gospel that we now call the Good Samaritan. But we have always listened to it, or read it, in terms of stereotypes, the stereotypes being that there are three bad guys—the lawyer, the priest and the Levite. And there's one good guy, the Samaritan.*

*Perhaps it's time to rescue this gospel from that stereotyping because as a matter of fact, it really has something different to say, and is much more contemporary than we'd like to think, because basically it's dealing with ethical and moral issues.*

*Let's start with the lawyer, who is a good guy. He is not trying to entrap Jesus, nor is he trying to make a fool of him. What he's doing was standard fare of that day. Jesus was an itinerant rabbi. As in the universities, the people would come up, particularly the lawyers, and they would pose questions, which was a part of the academic setting. Then they would all sit down and they would bounce the questions and the answers around, tapping the mind of the master to see what he would say. Much the same as they do in law schools today.*

*So, the lawyer was not being sneaky, nor was he being evil; he was simply asking a standard question. And in response, therefore, Jesus gives an answer, but he tosses the answer back to his audience, like a good teacher, and says basically, when you think of it, **"We have some ethical and moral issues here that are not that clear, so let's think about them."** And then he tells them the story of a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho; he was robbed, beaten, most of his clothes were taken, and he was left for dead.*

### ***The priest comes to the scene***

*The first one to come down the road was a priest. But the priest is a good guy, not as we're used to thinking of him; he isn't some insensitive clod. You have to look at the issues here. You have to remember that in those days*

*the priest was charged with ministering to the people and offering the sacrifice in the temple. It was something that the whole community expected of him. More than that, in those days the priest was social security and welfare and Medicaid all wrapped up in one person. He was the one who was the conduit for charities and care for people. People depended upon him.*

*Now there were certain things that would prevent him from doing the ministry which the people needed him to perform. And one of those things according to the law was to come within thirty steps of the dead. If he did that, or touched a dead body, he was made ritually unclean, and then he could not perform the prayers at the temple, and he was disqualified, for a good period of time, from his work. When you understand that, it puts the priest in a different light; he is no longer an insensitive clod. But there's a man lying there; he's dead as far as the priest can tell. He can't tell whether it's a fellow Jew because most of the man's clothes have been taken. If it were a non-Jew, he wouldn't even think of going near him or wasting time on him, because to the Jews of that time a neighbor was only another Jew.*

*He was faced here with an ethical, moral question: "If I go over and turn the body over with my foot just to make certain he's dead, and I become ritually unclean, then what good am I to the rest of my people? I can't help them, I can't service them. So, many people will be hurt, or certainly disenfranchised, if I touch this body. The man's dead anyway. What more can I do?"*

*The chances are very good that 100% of the audience who was listening to the story agreed with the priest's decision. He was very eminently sensible. Why should he jeopardize so many people by touching a dead body which he could not help any way.*

*But Jesus comes along in this discussion, and he opens the door to the possibility that the priest made a wrong decision. Jesus raises the possibility that although the priest would be legally unclean, and there were honest-to-goodness legal issues here that the priest had to consider, still there were other elements of the situation that had to be taken into account. Jesus offered compassion and love as factors that might bear upon the priest's decision and his moral quandary. So, what you have here is a good man who is following the rules, and Jesus comes along and says, "There may be other ways to measure your conduct."*

*This is a very contemporary situation. For example, doing business today can put unbearable pressures upon people. The result is that often they're forced to act in ways that are inhumane and hurtful to others in order to close the deal, in order to close the contract, in order to make "X" number of dollars, in order to meet the deadlines, and for a host of other reasons. People are often sacrificed.*

*This is to say that people in our own society are treated as objects, or things, or pawns—and it's good business. But Jesus raises the ethical question: "But are good business and sensibleness the only measurements?" To be compassionate often doesn't make good economic sense. But that's the way love is. Love often doesn't make sense.*

*The priest's dilemma is our dilemma every day, isn't it? Faced with a decision that'll be good for business but bad for human beings, we say, "Well, this is the sensible thing to do. If I don't do this, then people will lose their jobs, or the plant will lose money, people will be unemployed, so I kind of have to look the other way." You see, it's a moral dilemma. And the story is saying, "But Christians should have another measurement besides common sense. It should be compassion."*

#### ***And the Levite comes along....***

*Next we have another good guy, the **Levite**. He comes down the road shortly after. He wasn't a priest. He was more like a deacon, or chairperson, or head of the parish council. He knew that the priest had gone ahead of him because, in those days, the roads were so dangerous they knew which roads were traveled, and in small villages like that, he knew the priest had just preceded him from the temple, maybe by half an hour.*

*So, he comes along, and he sees the man who was apparently dead, and he thinks to himself, rightly, "Well, the priest went by and he didn't do anything, and he didn't think it was necessary to stop. And the priest is the priest, and he knows more than I do, and he's the boss. Why would I stop" Which is very good sense.*

*But you sense **another contemporary problem**, don't you? The Levite did not have authority. He deferred to the man who did. His tactic was to go along with someone else's judgment. If the person in authority over you makes a decision, then you just follow orders. What could be more reasonable? But Jesus comes along and says, "If you and I as Christians continue to use that excuse, then we'll continue to have concentration camps, we'll continue to have events like My Lai (soldiers who shot civilians "because I was just following orders"). You will continue to have people use excuses that say, "Hey, I'm looking the other way, but I'm not in charge."*

*If they're doing these horrible, despicable things at "HUD," and raking of billions of dollars from the poor who should get housing, and that comes from the top and my boss knows about it, then who am I to open my mouth? You know the story. If you're a whistle-blower, you are very liable to lose your job. This is the moral stance, isn't it? "That's not my department. I'm not in charge. I mean something's wrong going on in this plant, in this factory, in this profession. There are some bad, evil decisions being made but, you know, I'm only the underling. I'm only the Levite. I'm following orders. Don't blame me." That was Eichmann's plea at the Nuremburg trials.*

*And Jesus says, "That's not good enough. Not good enough. That's not good enough." You see what's wrapped up in this story? It's not an evil Levite; it's a good Levite who very sensibly says, "There's got to be a better measurement than that."*

#### ***And the Samaritan comes along ....***

*Finally, we have the **Samaritan**. Well, he identified, I guess, with the body there because that was figuratively, himself. He was an outcast. He was in a segregated society. He could touch the body fifty times—he'd be no worse off. The Jews hated him, considered him unclean. And whether he helped or not, it wouldn't change his status one bit with the Jews. They thought the Samaritans were wretched people anyway. So, mentioning that, Jesus brings up the whole issue of prejudice. And the audience would squirm at that.*

*Anyway, Jesus comes back to the question, "Now, who was neighbor to the one who was robbed?" The lawyer's reluctant admission is, "it must be the Samaritan," but his legal mind says the priest and the Levite were right. And Jesus has to concur. As far as they went, they were right. But what Jesus proposes is that we have to go farther.*

*That's what's in the gospel. It's a Gospel about ethics and morals. It's a Gospel that says that compassion comes over the rule, and love is over the law, and integrity is over authority. And to live that way is to live a profoundly Christ-like life. Be ready to take the consequences of that.*

*Most of us accommodate, don't we? And most of us excuse our behavior because "that's not my job." And most of us turn the other way because "that's not my responsibility." And most of us plead good common sense, like the priest. And there's a lot of merit to that. But the radicalness of the gospel says that we don't or should not, live like other people. It's a beautiful and costly thing to be a Christian.*

*And, if you were the priest, as good as he was, he followed the rules, you should have, in this instance, said, "to heck with the rules," and showed compassion.*

*And if you were the Levite, good man that he was, you should not hide behind the excuse that, “the boss didn’t do anything, so I guess I don’t have to do anything either.” Jesus says, “You have to jeopardize something to be a disciple.”*

*So, the next time you hear the story of the Good Samaritan, listen with new ears. Not with the old stereotypes of two lousy bums and one noble character. No, that gets us off the hook. We are talking about two fine, outstanding, honest people—three, including the lawyer. But all of them are being challenged by Jesus to go beyond the law, to go beyond the excuse, to go beyond the authority; and to come down to that love which expressed itself in compassion, and invites all of us to be Good Samaritans.*

### **Loving your neighbor is finding God**

The late Fr. Karl Rahner, S.J., regarded by many as the greatest theologian of the last century, writes: *“We can find eternal life, even if we have not explicitly known or called upon God, if through no fault of our own, we fail to discover this relationship. But no one can find salvation and God who has not explicitly loved his/her neighbor in word and deed. And people who think they can know God without loving their neighbor, know nothing about what it means to be related to God.”*

### **Oskar Schindler**

Oskar Schindler (remember the movie *Schindler’s List*) was raised a Catholic. He got married and became a notorious womanizer, big drinker and wheeler-dealer. He was the kind of person that devout Christians could understandably condemn as depraved and bad. Yet, this depraved creature risked his life several times to protect the lives of 1,000 Jews. After the war was over, Schindler led his 1,000 or so Jews into some good Catholic and Christian villages. Several of these villages did what they could to keep the Jews out of their town. Isn’t it amazing how some of us can be so prayerful and religious yet downright un-Christian, while others whom we might be quick to condemn, are much better at responding to the neighbor in need, and are in fact closer to God.

We might ask: Who was neighbor to the Jews: the notorious, fallen-away Catholic or the church-going Catholic?

### **Patricia Sanchez writes:**

Patricia Sanchez sees today’s Gospel as a call to *magnanimity* and then tells the following story about Abraham Lincoln to illustrate her point.

*In a letter to General Rosencrans, Commander of the Army of the Southwest, the President discussed the proposed execution of a Confederate Officer. Lincoln wrote:*

*“I have examined personally all the papers in the Lyons case, and I cannot see that it is a matter for executive interference. So, I turn it over to you with full confidence that you will do what is just and right; only begging you, my dear General, to do nothing in reprisal for the past—only what is necessary to ensure security for the future; and remind you that we are not fighting against a foreign foe, but our brothers, and that our aim is not to break their spirits but only to bring back their old allegiance. Conquer by kindness—let that be our policy. Very truly yours, A. Lincoln.”*

*In his policy of conquering by kindness, Lincoln may have been encouraging General Rosecrans to “conquer by kindness,” as it were, by treating the confederate officer with a mercy he did not expect and may not have reciprocated if the situation were reversed. Or Lincoln may have been calling upon his general to conquer himself and, rather than give in to his hatred for an enemy and a desire to avenge the lives of countless Union soldiers, to surrender that hatred and those desires and sublimate them unto kindness. Surely the Samaritans had a history of enmity with the Jews not unlike that which fomented between the North and South in the United States of America during its Civil War. Animosity had grown and mutual mistrust had become so unwieldy as to make peace seem an impossibility. Do not these same animosities continue to separate what should be kindred peoples all over the planet? Think of Rwanda, Chechnya, Darfur, Congo, etc. Because these hatreds continue to smoulder and separate, believers also continue to be called by God to magnanimity, and to a thoroughgoing sympathy (empathy) for the plight of all others whom they are to perceive, not as enemies, but as neighbors.*

Many years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, commenting on today’s parable in a small book called *Strength to Love*, noted what the priest and Levite asked: What will happen to *me* if I stop to help the wounded man? The Good Samaritan asked: What will happen to the *wounded man* if I don’t stop?

Have a wonderful week,

