

Love in Action

When I was a student at Fordham University in New York City, I got to know a Jesuit priest by the name of Father Paul Curran. He was a kind and gentle human being, soft-spoken but fiercely committed to social justice and advocacy for the poor.

As he was riding in his car in lower Manhattan, he saw a homeless man who was laying on the street vomiting profusely. It was early evening, and he was scheduled to be at a dinner that was being hosted by one of the Roman Catholic auxiliary bishops of the New York Archdiocese.

Seeing the man on the street, obviously in need of help, Father Curran stopped his car, helped the man to his feet, got him into the car, and then drove him to Bellevue Hospital. He took the man to emergency and stayed with him in the waiting room until a doctor finally saw him. Before he departed the hospital, the man asked why he would bother to help a stranger. Father Curran replied, “I guess it’s because I’m a Christian, and that’s what Christians are supposed to do.”

As it turned out, Father Curran never got to dinner with the bishop. His clothes were soiled with vomit, and he had an unpleasant odor. He told the bishop, “I don’t think you want me at your dinner tonight. I need to go home, shower and change.”

I don’t know how many of us would demonstrate that kind of love. Honestly, I don’t know if I would have stopped my car to help that man. More likely, I would have called 911. Admittedly, helping a stranger is a tough call, however we respond.

In our gospel, a lawyer asks Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The lawyer knows the commandments. He knows that he must love God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. He knows he must love his neighbor as himself. Jesus tells him that if he keeps these two commandments, he is doing God’s will. This prompts another question from the lawyer, “And who is my neighbor?”

This is not a theoretical question. In the time of Jesus the question of who should be treated in a neighborly way was dynamite – as it still is today. Gentiles had entered Palestine. Should Greeks, Romans and Syrians be treated as neighbors? Some of the Pharisees excluded Jews who lived in rural areas because they could not keep the ceremonial law as strictly, as those in urban areas. Others considered any enemy as being unworthy of neighborly treatment. The lawyer is implying, “I have no problem with loving God and loving myself, but figuring out who is my neighbor is difficult.” What are the precise implications in loving my neighbor? Do I include non-Jews or people who don’t obey the law or people who are irresponsible in their conduct?

In response Jesus tells the lawyer a story that we know as the parable of the Good Samaritan. To grasp the story we need to touch on a geography lesson. Jerusalem and Jericho are only 17 miles apart. They are both safe places: Jerusalem is the Holy City and Jericho is a desert oasis, but to get from one to the other is to travel through a forbidding

wilderness. This is a wilderness of ravines, wades, and treeless mountains that sap one's strength and parch one's throat. Jerusalem is a city set on a hill, nearly 3,000 feet above sea level, while Jericho at 840 feet below sea level is the lowest city on the planet. Nobody lingers on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

Jesus begins his parable by saying, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." No further identification is given. Jesus wants this man to be Every Man and Every Woman. Whoever stops to help him will do so not because of this man's status but because of his simple humanity.

When I was in law school, one of the most life-changing courses that I have ever taken was Jurisprudence, or the philosophy of law. In that course I studied the legal theory of Yale Professors Myres McDougall and Harold Lasswell. They defined law as a "policy science" that promotes human dignity. The notion of human dignity became a guiding principle in my own life as an attorney. When our Prayer Book was authorized by General Convention in 1979, I was delighted that human dignity was inserted into the Baptismal Covenant – the promise to "respect the dignity of every human being."

That is something we need to keep in mind as we respond to the political and social issues of our time. How can we as Christians best promote human dignity? How can we recognize and respect the inherent worth of every human being, regardless of their race, color, age, gender, nationality, disability, or sexual orientation?

Admittedly, affirming human dignity is easier than practicing it. Take poverty, for example, which is a complex issue with no simple solution. Many of the homeless on our streets are mentally ill and unable to hold a job. Others are veterans suffering from PTSD. Do we force them into treatment centers? Do we compel them to live in government housing? Do we forbid them from begging for money? What's the answer?

We want to help people in need, but how do we assist them if they don't want help or cannot help themselves? Why should we invest in individuals who may not make effective use of our support? Or even worse, who will take advantage of us?

In north Scottsdale, just off Scottsdale Road, there is a little restaurant called JJ's Deli which is in a strip mall. Heather and I will occasionally go there for breakfast. One day, as we were leaving our car to go to the restaurant, a young woman approached us, telling us she had a sick child and needed money for food. Would we help her out? My heart went out to her, and I gave her twenty dollars. She thanked me, and we went on our way. When we left the restaurant to return to our car, I saw the woman driving a beautiful red Lexus SUV. I thought, "How can she afford a car like that but can't afford food for her child?"

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Two weeks later, Heather and I were back at the same restaurant, and sure enough, as we got out of our car, the same woman approached us again, told us the same story, asking for money. This time I reminded her that I gave her money two weeks ago. Without saying a word, she promptly got into her car and drove away. ,

When I got to JJs, I asked one of the workers if he knew about a woman asking for money to feed her sick child, he replied, “Oh yes, she’s a regular here. The police know it’s a scam and drive her away, but she always comes back and manages to find people who believe her story.”

When I got to our table, I turned to Heather and said, “Well, there is good news here. At least there is no sick child.”

Yes, there are people who will take advantage of us. But we must ask in dealing with any person in need of help, “Are we loving them or judging them?” Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan in the classic form of “Three.” This is a teaching story, and his listeners knew that if the first two examples – the priest and Levite – were negative, they could expect the third example to be positive. The priest and Levite are the two negative examples; the people now await the hero of the story, fully expecting him to be someone like them... an Israelite! But Jesus blows them away. The hero of his story is a Samaritan. The Samaritans were despised. They had intermarried with foreigners, mixed with heathen, lived apart from other Jews, and did not worship at the Temple in Jerusalem but at their own Temple on Mount Gerizim. And Jesus makes a Samaritan his hero. Doing that could get a person killed.

The Samaritan does the right thing. The man's wounds are cleansed with wine. He keeps them supplied with oil and binds them with cloth, probably from his own clothing. He then takes him to an inn and pays for the man's continuing recuperation. We begin to see the story from the perspective of the man in the ditch. He didn't care if the man who helped him was a Samaritan, a Galilean, a Judean, a Roman, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Southern Baptist, or even an Episcopalian. He only knew that the man who provided care and concern was a neighbor to him.

Jesus asked the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” Though the lawyer could not say the despised word Samaritan, he understood Jesus' point, for he answered, “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus tells him, “Go and do likewise.”

In this story, you and I are not the robber. Neither are we the priest and the Levite. And no, we are not the Samaritan. You and I are the man lying in the ditch. And Christ has come to us and rescued us. He has saved us though we don't deserve it. He died for us so that we might live for him, the innocent one dying for the guilty, the sinless one suffering for sinners. God's amazing love for us is shown in Jesus hanging on the cross – he loves us that much!

And now we are charged with passing on that same love to others. Whether we think the poor are deserving or undeserving, we are to love them anyway. Love has no limits; love has no bounds. Love just keeps on loving because that is the nature of love. It was the German poet Goethe who observed: “You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him.” That's love – not expecting to receive a

benefit but giving in response to a need. When this truth seeps into our hearts, then we are ready to become the Good Samaritan and put human dignity into practice.

Eric Honecker was the General Secretary of the Communist Party in East Germany, the highest-ranking position in the country. He was ruthless and brutal in his exercise of power, and no friend of Christians. Many prominent Christian activists were imprisoned, and some executed under his regime. When East Germany finally collapsed, Honecker was put in prison but eventually released due to his terminal cancer. Upon his release from prison, he and his wife found themselves homeless. Where would they go? Who would take care of them?

The couple ended up staying in the home of a German Lutheran pastor, Uwe Holmer, who lovingly and tenderly cared for them. Many were outraged that a Christian pastor was sheltering a man who had so relentlessly persecuted Christians. But what could be more fitting for a Christian to do than show mercy?

In our Gospel, Jesus asks the lawyer, “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The lawyer responds, “The one who showed mercy.”

And Jesus says, “Then go and do likewise.”

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