

*A sermon given on Sunday, July 11, 2010  
at St. Alban's Episcopal Church and St. Paul's Episcopal Church,  
in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, by the Reverend Alan M. Gates*

### ***Being an Ordinary Hero***

In an old fable<sup>1</sup>, a blind man and a lame man arrive at a stretch of very bad road at the same time. The blind man begs the lame man to guide him through the difficult passage. "How can I do that," says the lame man, "as I am scarcely able to drag myself along? But if you were to carry me, I could warn you about anything in the way. My eyes will be your eyes, and your feet will be my feet." "Indeed," replies the blind man, "let us travel together." So taking up his lame companion, they travel together with safety and pleasure.

This fable carries an important reminder for us when placed alongside the equally familiar parable in today's Gospel. A parable, you recall, always had some twist. There was always some surprise in the story that served to drive home the point Jesus was trying to make. So what was the surprise in the parable of the Good Samaritan?

The surprise was certainly not in the setting of the robbers' attack. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was, it turns out, a lonely wilderness. The identity of the passers-by would also have been no surprise. Jericho had a large population of priestly families, so their presence on the road is not unusual. The fact that a stranger stopped to care for the victim was not even, in itself, the surprise. The basic, ancient rules of hospitality required nothing less. Proverbs 3:27 was typical of this code: *Refuse no one the good on which they have a claim when it is in your power to do it for them.*

No, the unique thing about the good Samaritan was really not what he did. The surprise was who he was – a Samaritan. For the Samaritans were the outcasts of Hebrew society. Racially they were considered a 'mixed breed'; spiritually they were considered heretics. In Jewish ethnic jokes of the time, it was the Samaritans who served as the scapegoats. So this was the twist, this was the surprise. The phrase "Good Samaritan" trips easily off our lips, but for the Jewish listener of Jesus' day, "good Samaritan" was an oxymoron. The man who stopped to help the robbery victim was someone who himself was a social outcast. The Samaritan was in a way just as much shunned, just as much a non-person as the one lying by the side of the road.

If Jesus' only point was that we have an obligation to help others who need it, he could have told a parable about a faithful Jew who helped an injured Samaritan. But he didn't. It was the other way around. So a key part of the story is that the man offering the help is someone with his own set of problems, someone with plenty of good reasons not to try. But, like the lame man and blind man in our opening fable, the Samaritan does not dwell on his own need. He does not use his own lack of clout as rationale for inaction. Like the lame and blind men, the Samaritan reaches out to help in spite of his own limitations.

A similar dynamic is at work in today's Old Testament Lesson [Amos 7:7-15]. Amos is given an unpopular message to deliver to the ruling authorities. Now, Amos is an outsider. He is a southerner from Judah, sent to scold Amaziah, the northern King of Israel. As far as Amaziah is concerned, Amos is what my grandmother used to call a "buttinsky", sticking his gloomy-doomy nose where it does not belong. Furthermore, Amos has no credentials for the job. He is a herdsman and a tree-trimmer, not an experienced prophet. So, Amos is sent by God

to deliver a message nobody wants to hear, in a place where he is considered an interloper, fulfilling a task for which he has no apparent qualifications. It's a wonder he ever left home!

But he did. Like the fable's blind and lame men, like the Samaritan, Amos does not, in the end, use his own limitations or lack of clout as a rationalization for inaction.

So, how about you and I? Do we allow ourselves to think that we cannot be much help to others because we ourselves do not somehow "have it all together?"

Do we too often see our own limitations as complete roadblocks between us and those who just might be our neighbors?

Are we waiting for that mythical day when we have no troubles of our own, before we can start to consider how others might need us?

This is such a natural human response. If my health has been slipping; if my finances have been tight; if my job has been frustrating; if my emotional life has been running at fever pitch; then certainly I cannot be expected to be worrying about some metaphorical neighbor! Yet we are reminded in this parable of Jesus that it was an outcast who helped the outcast. It was one who was himself shunned who had too much love to shun another.

This is not to belittle the many needs and limitations that you and I may have. It is, however, a call to remember that "the root of compassion is the recognition that the other is just like myself – in need. Yet need on both our parts is what enables us to find out what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves."<sup>ii</sup> That's the point of the tale of the lame man and the blind man. Getting beyond our own needs is the first step in getting beyond what separates us from our neighbor – and perhaps, resolving their needs and our own, together.

There is a sign at the foot of the Bourne Bridge, on the way to Cape Cod. It says, "Desperate? Call the Samaritans." And it gives the phone number. This wonderful organization is dedicated to saving the lives of the suicidal. It typifies our notion that a Samaritan is someone who comes to the rescue, often in some act of particular heroism. The Samaritan rescues a suicidal jumper. The Samaritan rescues a drowning child. But to be a Samaritan does not necessarily involve dramatic rescue or heroic acts. To be a Samaritan is, simply, to be a good neighbor. As Moses once said to the people, "The commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off... But the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." [Deut. 30:11,14]<sup>iii</sup> Not heroic acts, then, but living with God's law of love "in our mouth and in our hearts" – this is our call.

If you and I are perpetually waiting for the extraordinary hero, the superstar, the earthly messiah to lift us and others up from our individual or collective despair – well then, we have missed the point; we have missed Jesus' message when he said, "The kingdom of God is in your midst." No solitary human figure – religious, political, economic, or (dare I say it in the wake of this week's LeBron drama?) athletic – *no* earthly superstar can rescue us. The savior is Christ; and Christ is in us; and salvation is in the ordinary hero who is every good neighbor; who is every Samaritan; who is you and I, when we rise to our finest self – when we rise to lift up one another, instead of waiting for someone else to lift us up.

You have heard, perhaps, of the rabbi who once asked his pupils, "how can you tell when night has ended and day is about to begin?" The pupils pondered for a while, argued, and finally one of them said, "Could it be when you look off in the distance and see two trees, and you are able to tell that one is a fig tree and one is a palm tree?" The rabbi answered, "No." The pupils

argued a bit longer until another one offered, “Could it be when you look off in the distance and, seeing two animals, are able to distinguish that one is a sheep and one is a dog?” Again the rabbi answered, “No.” Finally, exasperated by the arguing, the students said, “All right then rabbi, tell us, how do you know when night has ended and the day is about to begin?” The rabbi slowly looked each one of them in the eye and said, “It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see there a brother or a sister. Because if you cannot do that, no matter what time of day it is, it is still night.”<sup>iv</sup>

God does not expect that we will change the world in an instant, or heal all its divisions on our own – only that we be human; that we treat others as neighbors; that we not let our own needs blind us to our capacity to help others. May God grant us the vision and courage  
to tell the difference between night and day;  
to recognize our brothers and sisters;  
to offer our eyes, even when we are lame;  
to offer our legs, even when we are blind.  
to be the unexpected but ordinary heroes along the roadside of our own life’s journey.

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<sup>i</sup> The fable has been variously attributed to Aesop, Hopi lore, the Polish fabulist Ignacy Krasicki, Swedish folklore, and doubtless other oral traditions.

<sup>ii</sup> *Serving the Word* commentary, 7/89.

<sup>iii</sup> Deuteronomy 30:9-14 is the alternative First Lesson for this Sunday, Proper 10-C.

<sup>iv</sup> Hasidic tale, oft-quoted, provenance unknown. This version from *Serving the Word* commentary, 7/89.