

# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2013

## Commentary

“Go and do likewise.”

Some biblical scholars, in interpreting the story of the Good Samaritan, suggest that a better title for it might have been “The Merciful Samaritan” or perhaps “The Compassionate Samaritan.” “Good” is simply too vague a term, they suggest, for what the Samaritan does. And, they point out, mercy is in some sense at the heart of our Christian faith. The term, “Lord, have mercy,” for instance, is an important part of many of our liturgies and litanies. In the Eastern Orthodox – and Greek Catholic -- churches, this petition – the *Kyrie Eleison* – is repeated literally hundreds of times in every Sunday’s liturgy, reminding the people of God that we are literally at God’s mercy throughout our lives. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is an important example of this.

Ancient saints and thinkers often allegorized the Parables of Jesus. That is, they saw in each character of the story a depiction of God, Christ, humankind, or the Evil One, among others. In such readings of the story of the Good Samaritan, they invariably saw in the Samaritan a depiction of Christ himself in his mercy for – and solidarity with -- his people. We on the other hand are represented in the poor traveler of the story -- down-trodden, beaten, and helpless. Only the mercy of Christ, and his solidarity with humankind, can save us and return us to life.

Indeed, thinking about it, perhaps the story really is more about the poor Jewish traveler than the Good Samaritan. What must this traveler have been thinking as he was beaten and left for dead on the roadside? What must have gone through his mind as he was ministered to by a rank outsider, an unclean person – actually an evil person in the thinking of the day? Did he have mixed feelings, knowing he owed his very life to someone he had been taught from childhood to despise? Did it affect his attitude toward others? Did he “go and do likewise?”

Intriguing questions...

Interestingly, the parable of the Good Samaritan occurs only in the Gospel of Luke -- no place else. There is nothing like it in any of the other Gospels, and it is not mentioned in any of the Letters of Paul, for instance. It stands alone. Yet, scholars are almost universally of the opinion that this story goes back to the very lips of Jesus. It is the sort of challenge that he loved to make. In this story, our Lord turns aside centuries of accepted wisdom. He makes his hearers think about themselves, their prejudices and preconceptions, and their attitude toward others. It could probably be argued that, if we had nothing else left of the New Testament, the Parable of the Good Samaritan would probably be enough to establish the basis of Christian faith and action.

British historian and scholar of religions, Karen Armstrong, in her monumental work, *The History of God*, makes the case for compassion as the basis of all true religion – especially perhaps Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Islam of course often refers to God – or Allah – as the all-compassionate one. And, the story of the Good Samaritan is one that any person of religious impulse or faith could identify with readily. It is an example of the ancient Hebrew command, echoed by our Lord himself, to do unto others what you would have them do unto you.

Compassion, or mercy if you will, is about more than doing nice things to others. Even arguably wicked and evil people know how to manipulate others with compliment and gift. Compassion and mercy must go much deeper than this. They are about the recognition in the other of the self, the recognition in both self and other of the Divine Presence which makes us one. Compassion is solidarity with others, no matter who they may be or where they may come from or what they may look like. It is not just pity; not just feeling sorry for someone worse off than ourselves. It is rather a profound insight into the very meaning of life itself.

Is the Samaritan just a nice guy with a little time and money to spare and not much to lose? Someone who wants to show up “those Jews”? Is he special? After all, the priest of the story and the Levite were also good in some genuine sense. They did what was expected, and that is not necessarily bad. We all try to do what is expected of us, more or less. We fulfill our duties. It takes all of that just to make our way through life.

But the Samaritan is beyond good, our Lord seems to be telling us. He is someone who understands divine mercy and human compassion and solidarity as at the core of all sense and meaning. Compassionate is what we become when we are fully children of God. Compassion is what happens when we do what God does.

The challenge of our Lord remains: Go and do likewise.

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## Prayer

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you and grant that, following the example of the Good Samaritan, they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

## Questions

☐ Who in your community stands in need of the compassion and solidarity of the Christian community?

☐ How can our churches be witnesses of the Mercy of God toward all His people?

☐ In what ways would more visible Christian unity enhance the Church’s compassion and solidarity with those who stand in need of justice in our context?