

Encounters on the Way

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Today we have before us what is perhaps the most familiar story Jesus ever told: the parable of the Good Samaritan. Hearing it again not only reminds us of an eternal truth, it also confronts us with the reality that just simply being so familiar with this story, desensitizes us. There is the danger, that on hearing this story again, we will simply be reminded of what we have already understood from previous encounters, and then shut down.

The dilemma for the preacher is, how does one evoke an environment in which the impact of the first telling is recreated for today's hearer.

To get at that issue I began by doing some research on events in recent history. Were there, I asked myself, recently reported events, in which the elements of the 'Good Samaritan' story were retold?

What I discovered, was that the 'falling into hands of brigands' was all too common, but the arrival of the 'Good Samaritan' was conspicuous by its absence. I was tempted to take a different tack on my research but persevered with a nagging question in my mind. "Has anyone ever actually read or heard the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' and acted on it?" It was for me, a moment of horror. A moment of fearing that someday I too might fall victim to brigands and in that crisis, people would walk by on the other side. I felt again that pain of a family that in the last fortnight, lost a son in a motor cycle accident. The young lad came off his bike in full view of many, some of whom then laughed at the boy and his dilemma as he lay dying on the road.

The moving on key for me, was the story of Kitty Genovese. My study led me to re-discover a phrase that continues to haunt human-ness. It is known as the 'Bystander Effect'. Let me quote from literature on the tragedy.

The case of Kitty Genovese is often cited as an example of the "bystander effect" though as earlier noted this case is now widely thought to have been over interpreted or even misinterpreted. It is also the case that originally stimulated social psychological research in this area. Ms. Genovese was stabbed to death in 1964 by a serial rapist and murderer. According to newspaper accounts, the attack lasted for at least a half an hour. The murderer attacked Ms. Genovese and stabbed her, but then fled the scene after attracting the attention of a neighbor. The killer then returned ten minutes later and finished the assault. Newspaper reports after Genovese's death claimed that 38 witnesses watched the stabbings and failed to intervene or even contact the police. This led to widespread public attention, and many editorials.

And again;

In April 2010 Hugo Alfredo-Yax was stabbed to death after coming to the aid of a woman who was being assailed by an attacker. At least twenty people walked by while he lay dying on a sidewalk in Queens.

Around this observed phenomenon, much public outrage and even legislation has come into being. As an example, once again quoting from articles on this subject;

The Charter of human rights and freedoms from Quebec, Canada, makes it mandatory to "come to the aid of anyone whose life is in peril, either personally or calling for aid, unless it involves danger to himself or a third person, or he has another valid reason".¹ It is therefore a legal obligation to assist people in the province of Quebec.

Other responses by government, either local or central, include the following;

A recent study published by International Ombudsman Association in the Journal of the International Ombudsman Association suggests that - in reality - there are dozens of reasons why people do not act on the spot or come forward in the workplace when they see behavior they consider unacceptable.²

And further;

The most important reasons cited were the fear of loss of important relationships in and out of the workplace and a fear of "bad consequences." There also were many reasons given by people who did act on the spot or come forward to authorities. This practitioners' study suggests that the so-called bystander effect is actually very complex, reflecting views of the context (and organization) and many personal reasons.³

Now all this organizational pondering may be very commendable and I for one, would want to be a part of any kind of understanding and change which addresses this tissue, but surely, I thought, we have already been there. Is this not what the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' is all about?

Time to take a return peek at the 'Good Samaritan' story again.

Who is the man in story? He could be anyone but because he was beaten senseless he was unable to speak and identify himself. Because he was stripped naked, there was nothing to identify him. No clothes, either rich-man's or poor-man's.

A Priest going that way saw him and passed by on the other side. The victim could have been a Priest.

¹ <http://www.canlii.org/en/qc/laws/stat/rsq-c-c-12/latest/rsq-c-c-12.html> Section 2

² <http://www.ombudsassociation.org/publications/journal/> Dealing with—or Reporting—"Unacceptable" Behavior - with additional thoughts about the "Bystander Effect" © 2009 Mary Rowe MIT, Linda Wilcox HMS, Howard Gadlin NIH, JIOA, vol 2, no 1, p52

³ <http://www.ombudsassociation.org/publications/journal/> Dealing with—or Reporting—"Unacceptable" Behavior - with additional thoughts about the "Bystander Effect" © 2009 Mary Rowe MIT, Linda Wilcox HMS, Howard Gadlin NIH, JIOA, vol 2, no 1, p52

A Levite going that way saw him and passed by on the other side. The victim could have been a Levite.

A Samaritan going that way saw him and stopped to help. The victim could have been a cultural enemy of the Samaritan but that didn't deter him, he stopped to help and this is the point at which the story shows the way.

The story is told to emphasize what is expected of a person claims to be a disciple. (What must I do to inherit eternal life?) While stopping is in itself not an indication of faith, yet faith would demand that we did seek to help in the most appropriate way. Indeed, the biblical injunction is even sterner than that. The first letter of John comes to say; ¹⁹ We love because he (God) first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, (turns away from him in an hour of need) he is a liar ⁴ You cannot claim to love God whom you cannot see, if you do not love your brother whom you can see.

Now I do not pretend that if we all accept this basic faith statement, all will be well. I know well enough from my own personal encounters that some of these 'need' situations are fraught with danger and we all, from time to time, fear being overwhelmed by events beyond our understanding.

For me the issue is not one of hoping that I am never confronted by a victim in this way, it is rather, if I am confronted by such an event, "how, in today's world, might I respond?"

I am reminded of a legend surrounding the life of Catherine Booth, who is regarded by many as the Mother of the Salvation Army.

"Wherever Catherine Booth went," said Campbell Morgan, "humanity went to hear her. Princes and peeresses merged with paupers and prostitutes."

One night, Morgan shared in a meeting with Mrs. Booth; and a great crowd of "publicans and sinners" was there. Her message brought many to Christ. After the meeting, Morgan and Mrs. Booth went to be entertained at a fine home; and the lady of the manor said, "My dear Mrs. Booth, that meeting was dreadful"

"What do you mean, dearie?" asked Mrs. Booth.

"Oh, when you were speaking, I was looking at those people opposite to me. Their faces were so terrible, many of them. I don't think I shall sleep tonight!"

"Why, dearie, don't you know them?" Mrs. Booth asked; and the hostess replied, "Certainly not!"

"Well, that is interesting," Mrs. Booth said. "I did not bring them with me from London; they are your neighbours!"

The first step to helping is in recognizing that this person in need, these people in need, are your neighbours in Christ. The very heart of our faith is about relationship in community. We need to remember that our well-being and indeed the well-being of the whole community is dependent on our caring for each. We need to remember that when we experience the touch of Christ in our lives it will surely be because that touch has been given by someone who allowed Christ to work through them, to us. In the same way we should remember that Christ will seek to act in the lives of others, through our hands and actions. All of us,

are in effect ‘vehicles of the incarnation’.

A second step is that of empowering our faith community to act appropriately, and that involves conversation and teaching.

Conversation to articulate precisely where our various awareness-s and understandings have got us to, and Training to enable us to grow the necessary social and Faith tools that will both, keep us safe and offer real help to those in need.

I am in no doubt, that at bottom, our faith community has the heart and the will to make a difference in what the Prayer Book calls, ‘This Naughty Word’⁵

What we need to do, is be able to say, “well fair enough if the government wants to legislate how we behave towards each-other, but for our part, we choose the gospel.”

It is one thing to be told about how we should behave to each other and encase those commands in the law. It quite another thing to be so changed by the gospel that we **want** to love one-another. In that way of thinking we will want to do every thing we can to help make our community a safe place for all.

The parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ offers us an opportunity for fresh insight. Fresh possibility. Christ is calling. We must respond.

⁵ From the Ordinal (The ordering of Priests) in the Book of Common Prayer.