

## "Covering All the Bases" (The Good Samaritan)"

Homily of July 11, 2004

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A little boy was overheard talking to himself as he strode through his backyard, baseball cap in place and bat and ball in hand. "I'm the greatest baseball player in the world," he said proudly. Then he tossed the ball in the air, swung the bat, and missed. Undaunted, he picked up the ball, threw it into the air again and said to himself, "I am the greatest player ever!" He swung at the ball once more and again he missed. And then he paused a moment to examine the bat and the ball carefully. Then, he once again threw the ball into the air and said, "I am the greatest baseball player who ever lived!" He swung the bat hard again, and again, missed the ball. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "What a pitcher!"

Now, this kid was certainly covering all the bases. And the scholar of the law in today's gospel was doing much the same as he questioned Jesus about what would bring him to eternal life. You see, lawyers ask smart questions and the lawyer who meets Jesus in today's gospel is also very clever and cunning. He is trying to catch Jesus out. He is attempting to wrong-foot Jesus in front of His followers in order to discredit Him. You see, the lawyer is no different from the lawyers you find in the cut and thrust in any courtroom battle. OK, he is smart. He is able, you see, to quote the law verbatim. He knows the strict letter of the law. But Jesus, being a wise teacher and moral educator, knows that giving the perfect answer in this way is not enough. He realizes that this scholar of the law, this scholar, has missed the point.

Moses, in our first reading, has got it somewhat right by saying that "the law is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts. And all you have to do is to carry it out." Moses, then, is exhorting the people to not just memorize the law, but to internalize it, to make it your own. The scholar of today's gospel knows the strict letter of the law, but is completely ignorant of its spirit. This is why Jesus, then, had to go on to tell him the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is hoping, you see, to lead him gently to discover the answer to his original question, "What will bring me to eternal life?" Jesus seems to have succeeded in doing so when the lawyer recognizes that the neighbor is the one who treated the victim with mercy, with love, and with compassion.

Now, this contrasts greatly with the story of a judge told by a former mayor of New York City. One day the mayor went to a senior citizens' gathering in the Bronx. And there were about two hundred people waiting for him. He said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I know that crime is on your mind. And I want to tell you that a judge I know was mugged this week. And you know what he did? He called a press conference and he said to the reporters gathered, 'This mugging will in no way affect my judgment and decisions in matters of this kind.' " .... And an elderly lady stood up

at the back of the hall and said, "Well, then, mug 'im again!"

You see, we too in the Church have been slow learners when it comes to the law, especially the moral law. Catholic moral teaching invited misery and anger and lots and lots of guilt. And it has been, I suppose, far too legalistic, far too by-the-book in the past. And much of it was taken out of context in its implementation. And it was often implemented coldly and boldly. We had a list of rules found in manuals that were imposed on us personally. They were phrased in the language of what must not be done, in the language of avoidance, rather than in the language of what could be done, positively, to make the law of God's love alive in our world, and real in our world. We often described ourselves in terms of what we were against rather than what we were for. God was presented in the image of a law-giver or a supreme judge. And it was a moral code of obligation rather than a code of choice. For example, you might be obliged to do an eight-hour day at work, but how you chose to spend the eight hours was not prescribed. In other words, the quality of your work could be very poor and reprehensible. You were told not to commit adultery, but never told to be more attentive and sensitive to your spouse. It was mandated that you attend Mass every Sunday or at least once a week. But it was never prescribed how this celebration might inform or direct your social and moral conscience throughout the week, for the rest of the week.

So, thankfully now, in recent times, there is a shift happening, away from the narrow legalistic, negatively prescriptive presentation of the moral law. And this shift, you see, is more towards a personalist, relational and responsible model. It takes account, above all, of virtue, of doing good as the context. Our moral and spiritual lives, you see, are very much integrated. You cannot divorce prayer from the rest of your life. In other words, it is all about how I relate to others, how I relate to my environment, and how I relate to God. It is not just about God and me, the Judge and I. It invites us to reflect on our relations with others, just as the scholar of the law was invited to do so in today's parable. It is a call to love. It is a call to be a good person and to do right by others. It is not just about keeping the law for my own personal salvation. It is not just about keeping a set of rules. No. It is more about keeping promises to love God, to love your neighbor, and to love yourself.

You see, our spirituality, whatever level that spirituality may be at for each and every one of us, will go a long way to embrace Jesus and what Jesus expects, as presented in today's gospel. Our spirituality is not about our understanding and knowledge of the law. It is not just about our beliefs as Catholics. No. It is much much more about our experience of life and, above all, about our experience of God. As Richard Gula has pointed out, there is no morality without spirituality and no spirituality without morality. Morality is the public face of spirituality. And the tripod, the tripod of the spiritual life is study, prayer and action. And, you see, the lawyer in today's gospel had all the study done but not much more. The priest and the Levite probably had spent a lot of time on their knees praying, but it seems it had led them into a kind of bogus and pious mission and not much more. They were as self-centered as the lawyer. But the Good Samaritan, we could take it, maybe had all three: study, prayer, and above all he had action.

Now, if we could add just a little of what the boy had in our opening story, namely positive thinking, to study, prayer, and action, we could claim today that we have covered all the bases, and proclaim that "I am the greatest disciple in the world! I am the greatest disciple ever! I am the greatest disciple who ever lived!" Amen.