



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. *AMEN* ✠**

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is, on the surface of things, an eloquent lesson about God's standards of neighborliness. In God's eyes every other human being on the planet is our neighbor, and we are duty bound to treat even our mortal enemies with the same love and care we'd show to members of our immediate family.

This is a rather uncomfortable message for folks whose personal definition of neighborliness runs to the occasional grudging loan of a step-ladder to the folks next door. But the sad fact of the matter is that the messages contained in this parable get increasingly disturbing the deeper one delves into it. Not the least worrisome aspects of this parable are the lessons it teaches us about the nature and consequences of original sin.

St. Paul makes an agonizing admission in his letter to the Romans (7:16). He says, in paraphrase: "The things I desperately want to do, I am quite unable to do. And things I absolutely hate doing, I find myself doing constantly."

Now Paul strove valiantly to do the right thing. He spent hours in prayer and self-examination. His sole aim was to further

Christ's kingdom. Yet despite all his Herculean efforts, he still managed to foul up on a regular basis. He did so as a consequence of original sin. This is a condition that might be described as an irresistible urge to act on our own authority; to do what is right in our own eyes, rather than what is right with God.

No matter what gets written in the trendy theological journals, Jews at the time of Christ understood the reality of original sin, even if they hadn't put a name to it or defined it doctrinally. They believed the Law of Moses was perfect, but, contrary to what you might have heard, they didn't believe the Law would save them in the way we believe Christ will save us.

Rabbis at the time taught that only God is perfect and, thus, only he is capable of observing his law in its totality. Man's hope, said the rabbis, lay in striving mightily to observe the law and a person able to keep at least 51 percent of it would enjoy the hope that God would accept him as righteous and worthy of salvation. This doesn't offer the degree of comfort Christians enjoy, but it is comfort nevertheless.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan,

however, utterly undermines this hope. It illustrates the fact that it is possible to observe the Law of Moses to the absolute letter, yet still commit a terrible sin.

You see it is wrong to assume that the Priest and the Levite callously ignored the desperate plight of the fellow who had been robbed, beaten, and left for dead in the gutter. The sad fact of the matter is they were actually prevented by the law from giving him first aid and assistance. All they could do was observe his injuries at a distance and report what had happened to the nearest authority.

Jesus' listeners would have recognized the problem immediately. The Priest and the Levite were going to the Temple in Jerusalem – to serve God's altar. But to do so, the law demanded they keep themselves ritually pure. If they had touched a bloody, battered body – or, worse, a dead one – would have immediately have been made unclean. Serving the altar in such a state would have been committing one of the most grievous of all sins.

The Priest didn't have option of saying: "I'll just help the guy and ask Father Johnson to fill in for me." The priest was in an especially difficult position. Priests were called to serve the Temple altar only once in their lifetime and trading places was not allowed. Besides both men were making their way to the Temple to do service to God not their own behalf, but upon behalf of the whole Jewish people. Either they let down one man or the whole Jewish people. As a choice, it was painful, but ultimately a no brainer.

The Samaritans were a particular hated by Jew people. Samaritans lived in Samaria, the Jewish kingdom destroyed, 700 years before, by the Assyrians. They, too, claimed

to be Chosen People. They used virtually the same Torah – the Law, the five Books of Moses – as their Holy Scripture. But they were far more relaxed than the Jews about observing the minutiae of the Law.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan points out that the only person able to perform the great mitzvah – a sacramental good deed – to the injured man was the Samaritan, whose observance of Mosaic Law was casual to the point of sacrilege and whose claim to be one of the Chosen People was to Jews sheer blasphemy.

Paradoxically, observance of the Law of Moses required the holiest men in the Jewish religion – the equivalent, say, of a Christian priest and deacon – to commit the grievous sin of failing to help a neighbor in dire need.

Jesus summarized the Law of Moses, thus: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God will all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment and the second is like, namely this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self. There is none other commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Jesus is saying that the most important means we have of proving our love for God is by doing good to our fellow men. It's easy enough to talk the talk. But Jesus insists we walk the walk. *AMEN*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be  
Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power,  
Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***