



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 2nd, 2012

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is not intended to be an illustration of the faults and flaws of ancient Judaism and the vast superiority of modern Christianity. Nor is it an illustration of how much nicer than Jews the Samaritans are. It is a graphic warning that decent God-fearing people all too often all get so wrapped in the petty fogging details of their faith, that they are unable to put it into practice when the need arises.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was the most dangerous stretch of highway in the Holy Land. It runs through wild mountainous terrain, which, for centuries, provided a haven for brigands, bandits and guerrilla bands. In the days of King David it was so dangerous it was nicknamed the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

David wasn't guilty of hyperbole when he wrote: "Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil." He was simply affirming that traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was about the most terrifying thing a human being could do.

At the time of Christ, travelers on the road banded together in caravans. Nobles and wealthy merchants employed bands of

professional bodyguards to guard them. The less prosperous would either beg a place in one of the caravans of the wealthy, or join an official convoy transporting tax money, government supplies and government officials. Failing that, they would wait until enough people had arrived to form a strong enough traveling party to beat off potential attacks.

In any event, nobody in his right mind would travel the road alone. In other words, the man had "fallen among thieves" on this terrible road had played the complete fool. He had set out alone without taking the most elementary of precautions.

These days few people waste sympathy on folks who behave in such an idiotic fashion. They'd simply mutter: "Serve 'em right" and not spare them another thought. So please don't imagine that people in this current enlightened age would behave more charitably to him than the priest and the Levite.

The Priest and the Levite were doubtless men of impeccable character – pillars of the church, the best of neighbors, leaders of their communities, and, like all practicing Jews in those days, charitable to a fault.

Before Christ's resurrection, they could not benefit from his atoning sacrifice. In those days, Jews lived in hope that God would accept them as worthy of salvation because of their rigorous adherence to the Law of Moses.

The Rabbis didn't naïvely imagine any human being would be able to obey 100 percent of this very complicated legal code. Rather they believed God would save everyone who managed to observe 51 percent of the law, one of the most important elements of which was to be charitable. Prosperous Pharisees would station servants by their front doors to watch out for beggars so that they didn't miss a chance to give them alms.

The Priest and the Levite did not pass the wounded man by for any lack of charity. They passed him by because their interpretation of Jewish ritual laws obliged them to. They were going to Jerusalem to serve at the Temple, and the Law of Moses required them to be ritually pure. Had they so much as touched the injured man they would have become ritually unclean and, thus, ineligible to serve at the Temple.

They didn't have the option of saying: "I'll look after this poor guy, and someone else can take my place at the Temple." Service at the Temple was arranged strictly according to seniority. Priests and Levites might be called only once in their lifetime to serve at the Temple, and there was no such thing as swapping shifts. An unclean clergyman entering the temple precincts would have defiled the entire building and everything in it.

The Samaritan was able to help the injured man when the Priest and the Levite could not because he was not a Jewish clergyman and, thus, not bound by their ritual law. It

was not that he was necessarily more charitable than they. It was simply that the rules of his religion didn't prevent him from going to wounded man's aid.

In short, the strict demands of Jewish ritual made it impossible for the Priest and Levite to do their duty towards their neighbor at the same time as doing their duty to God. And this frustrated the whole purpose of the Law. God gave us the law in order that we could demonstrate our love for him by loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

Jesus is telling us that we all too often get bogged down in the details of our faith, the petty fogging rules of ritual and dogma. In doing so, we lose sight of the big picture – the primary purpose of our faith – showing our love for God by whole-heartedly loving our fellow men.

We Christians are just as guilty of this as our Jewish neighbors. So, for that matter, are Samaritans whose own ritual laws aren't so different the Jewish ones. As Jesus defines things, our neighbors are by no means simply our fellow Christians. Sometimes our neighbors will be the most disgusting sinners – not simply the homeless and mentally ill who haunt our streets, but ugly, unrepentant evildoers.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan tells us we do not have the option of avoiding contact with them. It is, in fact, our duty to help them, to bind their wounds, and lead them back to the paths of spiritual safety. In other words, we need to pay even more attention to the obligations our faith imposes upon us than the obligations it imposes upon others. *AMEN.*

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