



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity, August 30th 2015

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

There's only one person that emerges well from the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and that's the Good Samaritan, himself. All the others – the thieves, the priest, the Levite, the innkeeper, and the injured man in the gutter – emerge from the story looking like knaves, dolts or downright fools.

The thieves are clearly knaves – plundering an innocent traveler on the highway. The innkeeper is a dolt. If he had bothered to consider the precepts of his religion, he would have cared for the injured man for free instead of taking the Samaritan's money.

The injured guy in the gutter is a downright fool. Who else but an idiot would venture out alone on what was one of the most dangerous stretches of highway in the world – a highway even the valiant King David knew as “the Valley of the Shadow of Death.”

But what of the priest and Levite? What description best fits them? They can't be described as fools even though they, like the crime victim, were both traveling the road alone. Both were on their way to Jerusalem to serve at the Temple. The priest would have been protected by the sanctity of his office. It would be a foolhardy thief who dared lay hands on one of God's anointed. The Levite – possibly a temple guard or a member of the religious police – was also a man to be reckoned with.

It is also difficult to classify them as knaves or dolts. Both 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 Jesus' resurrection, they could not benefit from his atoning sacrifice. In those days, Jews lived in the hope that God would accept them as worthy of salvation because of their rigorous adherence to Mosaic Law.

The Rabbis didn't naively imagine that any human being would be able to comply with 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, however, did not pass the wounded man by for any lack of charity. They passed him by because Mosaic Laws with regard to clergy 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.

If they had been Jewish layman they would have been permitted by the Law of Moses to help the injured man. But as clergy their duty to God took precedence over everything, including their duty to their fellow men.

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 other words we simply cannot write off the priest and the Levite as knaves, dolts or fools. The strict demands of Jewish ritual law made it impossible for them to do their duty towards their neighbor at the same time as doing their duty to God.

It seems reasonable to suppose that on reaching the inn where the Samaritan lodged the injured man they would have informed the innkeeper that a badly wounded man was laying beside the road. They might even have offered the landlord money to help him. But this does not alter the fact that the standard First Century understanding of the Law of Moses prevented them from helping this unfortunate man in dire need succor

In short, the standard application of the law frustrated the entire 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.

The parable tells us we all too often get bogged down in the details of our faith – the petty fogging rules of ritual and dogma – we lose sight of the big picture: the primary purpose of our faith. And this is to show 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 just our fellow Christians. Actually the word "neighbor" encompasses every single person who comes into our orbit. Sometimes our neighbors will be people who obviously need our pity and help – the hungry, the homeless, the mentally ill; people who used to be known as the "deserving poor."

But the word "neighbor" also covers people some might consider to be the "undeserving" – people who have brought calamity on their own heads, including truly ugly, unrepentant evildoers. The Parable of the Good Samaritan tells us that while we might pass judgment on their acts, we do not have the option of avoiding contact with them.

It is, in fact, our duty to love them. Love does not mean that we must approve or condone their sins. But Jesus expects us to try to help them. Like the Samaritan, we must offer 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.*