

15th Sunday--Cycle C
(Deut 30:10-14; Col 1:15-20; Luke 10:25-37)

It is no doubt by design that today we have readings that feature the two great law-givers of the Bible, Moses the great lawgiver of Mount Sinai and Jesus the great Teacher of the Sermon on the Mount. Moses ends his exhortation today with, “You have only to do it,” referring to the Law, while Jesus exhorts His hearers to, “Go, do in like manner,” referring to the example of the Good Samaritan.

Israelite law went through various stages of growth. Moses, speaking in Deuteronomy, would be referring to the whole law, the Torah. Much earlier in Deuteronomy he gives the great exhortation, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. Therefore you shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole being, and with your whole strength.” This is the famous “Shema` Yisrael,” the prayer that every pious Jew recites twice a day, morning and evening. The traditional number of laws is 613; and if you have trouble remembering that, just recall that it is supposed to be the same number as the bones in your body.

The pious Jew does not consider the law burdensome, but delights in bearing the yoke of the law. However, the truly observant Jew is confronted with a number of dietary laws, which must have led to complications. In addition to the actual laws, there are a number of rules about how to observe them. Once I was having a Sabbath dinner with an orthodox Jewish couple and the wife lights the candle to mark the beginning of the Sabbath (you may remember the beautiful scene when Golde did it in “Fiddler on the Roof”).

However, on this occasion, when the wife had lit the candle, she blew out the match (you would, too, wouldn't you?). But the husband reproved her: "You shouldn't have blown it out; you should have shaken it out instead." She looked so crestfallen that I said, "That's all right, Ruth, we won't tell anyone"—which didn't cheer her up in the least.

There are so many ways in which laws are now expanded from their original import. One of the early groups that made up Israel was the Kenites; they were metal smiths (that's what the name Kenite means—"smith"). It has been suggested that the prohibition of lighting a fire on the Sabbath began as a Kenite law: for a smith to light a fire is to begin work. *Now* this law is interpreted to include striking a match or flipping on a light switch. If you want light during the Sabbath, you have to turn it on before sundown on Friday. The story is told of Levi Cohen who had forgotten and was lamenting that he would have to spend the Sabbath in darkness. But then he spied Pat Riley and thought, "I'll invite Pat in for a drink, he will see it is dark, and turn on a light." So he called Pat over, Pat came in and turned on the light; they had a drink, chatted a little, then Pat got up to leave—and, on his way out, turned off the light. (An observant Jew told me that one.) "You shall not boil a kid got in its mother's milk" is now interpreted to mean not to have milk products and meat at the same meal. (That is why cheeseburgers are not kosher.)

Many scholars insist that Jesus was an observant Jew, and in many ways He was; He had tassels on His garment, went to Jerusalem for Passover, celebrated other Jewish festivals, He taught in synagogues and in the Temple.

However, He did not observe with the punctilio required by the Pharisees, especially not in those points that were added to the laws. Apparently He did not wash His hands before meals—at least His disciples didn't and they undoubtedly would be following His example—and He defended them against those who accused them. And He was not being observant when He told the crowds that “nothing that enters one from the outside can defile a person; the things that come out from within are what defile.” On this Mark comments: “Thus he declared all foods clean.”

I think Mark's report on Jesus' encounter with the lawyer is more original than what we have just read from Luke. In Mark a scribe asks Jesus “Which with the first of all the commandments?” (With 613 to choose from, it's not an easy question.) And Jesus answers in the words of the Shema` Yisrael—not properly one of the commandments at all—and adds from a totally different context, “The second is like this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus is the one who joins them as a perfect rule of life. Luke tells as he does so that the lawyer can ask the question about who is the neighbor.

But that still leaves the question: “who is my neighbor?” The answer should be clear even from the OT: it is in Lev (19:18) that we read “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And not far away (Lev 19:34), “You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the native born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself.” Thus it is Jesus who thus likens love of God and love of neighbor when He says, “The second is this There is no commandment greater than these.”

The words are easy to say but not always easy to put into practice. In Jesus' parable both the priest and the Levite pass by. It wasn't fear that they would be rendered unclean by contact with a corpse; they just didn't want to get involved. How often do we hear, "I didn't want to be involved"? Notorious is the case of Kitty Genovese, a young woman who, in 1964, was stabbed in Kew Gardens, a residential complex in New York. She screamed for help, to no avail, and lay helpless for half an hour, until the murderer returned and completed the crime. Whoever may have heard her screams did not want to get involved.

However, contrast the Good Samaritan, one who was willing: he saw the wounded man and "was moved with compassion." It involved labor, time, and expense. Hoisting an unconscious man unto his donkey could not have been easy. He was no doubt on a business trip, but he delayed his business in order to help. The traveler had been robbed of all he had, so the Samaritan paid for him to be taken care of at the inn. That's what it means to "do unto others."

Some of the Church Fathers, instead of seeing here a parable, i.e., a story that teaches a lesson, treat it as an allegory in which each element had its meaning: Jesus is the Samaritan, the injured man the human race; the oil and wine, the inn, the innkeeper, the two coins, each had to have an allegorical sense. But we don't have to resort to allegory to see Jesus personified as the Good Samaritan. He was indeed moved to compassion, not for the human race but for each person; all of us are, individually, in need of what He does for us. For Him it's not a matter of neglecting His business to tend to us: we ARE His

business. It's not a matter of giving us to an innkeeper's care: He left the warmth, comfort, safety of His heavenly home to enter a world often hostile in order to care for us Himself; He came to teach us about God, teach us that the way to God is love, and give us an example of what it means to love. Some of His ways we probably can't imitate, e.g., His miracles of healing or feeding the multitude. But there are *little ways* that we can imitate: i.e., His acts of kindness, His acts of forgiveness.

Therefore, imitating Jesus in order to be Good Samaritans doesn't involve anything we can't do. We can "do unto others" with acts of friendliness, kindness, generosity, forgiveness—forgiveness can be difficult, but remember what Jesus says is the fate of the unforgiving: their sins will not be forgiven. We may not be able to feed multitudes, but we can offer generosity to the poor and hungry. We may not be able to cure the sick, but most of us have occasion to care for them from time to time. And everyone can smile. (Let's try it now!) Remember St. Teresa's saying "God deliver me from sad-eyed saints!" A smile doesn't cost anything. A smile, a wave of the hand, is an act of friendship. Smiles can lift spirits. We should not be like the priest and the Levite; we should be willing to be involved, at least with the friendship of a smile.

