

Sunday 15

No conversation which begins with one person “testing” the other is off to a good start. And that is what we have in today’s Gospel. This “scholar of the law” is testing Jesus about his understanding of how a person can get to heaven. Jesus answers him by asking him a question: “How do you read our law?” And when the scholar answers by saying that the observance of the two great commandments, love of God and love of neighbor, is the way to heaven, Jesus tells him he is right.

The conversation could have stopped right there, but the man won’t let it. Maybe he feels that Jesus has defeated him. Now he has “to justify” himself. Again, that is not a very good way to begin a conversation. But the man begins again: “So we are to love God and our neighbor. But who is our neighbor?” I get the impression that he wants Jesus to distinguish between people who are neighbors and others who are not; fellow Jews, for example, but not Gentiles. But Jesus, instead of answering by distinguishing between those to be treated as neighbor and those not to be treated as neighbor, tells him a story, and his story turns the man’s question on its head. For the story makes a half-Jew, a Samaritan, so someone whom this man might want to exclude from his group

of neighbors, the exemplar of neighborly love. “Imitate him,” Jesus tells his questioner, “by caring for whoever is in need, for anyone in need is your neighbor.”

This story would have horrified this scholar. He would have identified with the person lying by the roadside in need of help, and he would have seen the priest and the Levite, both religious figures and his religious associates, pass him by. But a Samaritan, a half-Jew, someone not part of his group of neighbors, is the one who stops to help, and this is the one he must imitate if he is to fulfill the second great commandment. Yes, the story turns his world and its norms upside down.

Kindness, neighborliness, comes from strange places, is what the parable is teaching us, and we can be taught to be neighbors by those whom we would not have considered as having anything to teach us. And maybe that will help us to get beyond our prejudices. The kindness of the stranger will teach us to be kind to strangers.

But there is also a more obvious lesson we can learn from this parable. To live the commandment of love of neighbor can throw a monkey wrench into our well-laid plans. We are busy, we have things to do and places to go, but suddenly someone in need is

thrown in front of us, and we have to make a choice: to continue with our plans or to stop and attend to this person's needs. There are always excuses to justify our not stopping, and sometimes some of them may be just. Yet this parable is telling us that we have to be very careful here. Sometimes, no matter how important our plans, we have to let them go in order to attend to the needs of a neighbor. So we pray for guidance in this matter. We look at our lives and ask ourselves: "Am I passing by people who are asking for my help? Should I stop to help them? Or do I really believe that in a particular case the need I see in the future is more important than the one pleading for my attention here and now?" Yes, we need prudence in this judgment. But this much is clear. There is no one who is not my neighbor. Anyone in need is my neighbor.