

The first reading from Deuteronomy is very clear – you already know what is right and wrong – you just have to do it! It's summed up in various ways such as "Love God and love your neighbor," and "Do for others what you want them to do for you." So as you look around, where is your neighbor? What do you see? And more importantly, how do you interpret what you see?

The priest and the Levite knew what they were seeing – a man robbed, beaten, and left to die by the side of the road. But how they interpreted the situation made the difference. Here are three fellows, headed home from the holy city of Jerusalem, presumably having been to the Temple to perform their religious responsibilities. If they got involved with this man, they know it will affect their holiness, because by their association with blood they'd become ritually impure – they would lose their holiness. Or maybe they have a tight schedule and other responsibilities at home or for their family and helping them man would cause them an inconvenient delay. In any case, they have their reasons, and they leave the man dying by the side of the road.

[I have to tell you – this so reminds me of a predicament that a couple of classmates told me about while we were in the seminary. The expectation was that we were at mass each day. They were running late, and when they got to the parking lot, another seminarian had a flat tire and needed some help. They were "stymied" and didn't know what to do – get to mass, or help the fellow with the flat tire! Maybe you've been in a similar quandary before.] Anyway, the question is – what did they see, and how did they interpret it? The priest and Levite saw a man who'd been beaten and left half-dead. They saw an occasion that would adversely affect them and their state of purity, and so they passed him by. Certainly their decision affected their holiness; but the parable suggests they didn't care for their holiness as well as they thought they had!

Compare them to the Samaritan – he looked and saw the same man, but his interpretation was quite different. He saw a man was suffering, and responded with compassion. He didn't think "how is this going to affect me?" but "how can I help this poor man?" That's compassion – to feel with the *other* person, not to be thinking selfishly about *oneself*. And the surprise in the parable is that this was a Samaritan – a fellow more likely to look down on a Galilean and hold his nose, not one to stoop down and care for his wounds. In typical Middle Eastern fashion, the parable describes his response with great exaggeration – he dresses his wounds; he takes him to a place of safety; he pays for his care; and he promises to return to pay for any other expenses that might occur.

Jesus tells the parable because he doesn't fall for the lawyer's trick question – the lawyer knew the right response to his own first question: Love God, and love your neighbor; And he knew the answer to his second question, "Who is my neighbor?" in the law, it was your kinfolk, your blood relatives. And Jesus said no, it's not limited to your family, or even your friends and acquaintances. You must be a good neighbor to everyone, including to the foreigners that you think of as enemies.

How do you see foreigners? I suspect that you see them with eyes of compassion, suffering in their helplessness after an earthquake which they could not control? How do you see illegal immigrants? Are they pre-judged? generalized as "law-breakers" and "criminals"? Are they perceived with eyes of compassion as people trying to find decent jobs and raise their families? How do you see the Japanese or the Germans or the Vietnamese – are you caught in history and hatred as people against whom we fought wars? Or has that somehow changed over the years, and how did that happen? How about people of the Middle East –Palestinians and Israelis? People from Afghan and Iraq and Iran and Pakistan? How about Muslims – are they all terrorists and suicide bombers? Here is Jesus' question in our own time – How are you a neighbor to the people of Haiti and others who suffer for natural disasters? How are you a neighbor to Muslims? How are you a neighbor to illegal immigrants? And how do you pick and choose when you will be a good neighbor? Jesus' response to the tricky lawyer is that "You don't pick and choose. In fact, for your enemy, you go the extra mile!" "You already know what is right and wrong – you just have to do it!"