

The story of the Good Samaritan is probably one of the best known passages in the Gospels. The name has entered every day speech as we speak of someone going out of one's way to help a stranger. It is a powerful image that helps us to understand Jesus' approach to our relationships with each other. "Who is my neighbor?" is similar to Cain's response to God about his brother, Abel, "Am I my brother's keeper?" They are both haunting questions in the present state of the world.

People complain about their learning Christianity as a tedious list of dogmas and rules. But the Bible in general, and Jesus in particular, makes Christianity a matter of relationships beginning with a Triune God. It is easier to memorize dogmas and keep rules than to live in relationship in the manner which Jesus ask of us.

Pope Francis has marked the focus of his teaching in three encyclicals. The first was called "The Joy of the Gospel." It is about our relationship to Jesus and the gospel. The second was "Laudato Si – Care of our Common Home," which is about our relationship to the created world. The third encyclical, called "Fratelli Tutti," is about our relationship with all other human beings. Yes, it is all about how we relate, how we live in harmony with, how we seek to promote unity with others.

The story of the Good Samaritan is the theme of chapter two of the third encyclical, Fratelli Tutti. In an extended commentary, Francis speaks of being victim, bystander, and neighbor. We can fill in the blanks of who is who in today's world. Think of a victim that you would just as well leave in the ditch and pass by. What would you do? Perhaps it is a trap set up, and the rescuer would become a victim. One commentator says the Samaritan is an image of God as seen in Jesus Christ. God does not hesitate to help the person in distress, even at danger to his own safety and life.

Most of us grew up and learned our faith in the post-Reformation Church. The emphasis was on believing and doing what is right in order to save one's soul. Religion became very individualistic. The focus in both the gospels and the longer tradition on relationships was not emphasized. But, since the late 19th century, the Popes have been putting forth social teachings that we now call the Church's Social Justice doctrine of the Church. This has been called the Church's best kept secret. And critics have not liked this move and told teachers of social justice to

get back into the sacristy and stay out of politics. For instance, the Pope speaks of the humanity of every refugee and every person trying to emigrate. It does not mean there should not be legal parameters on immigrants. It does mean we first see them as human beings and treat them as human.

The very first principle of social justice teaching is respect for the individual, every individual, especially those in most need, those on the peripheries of society. Pope Francis has certainly embodied this in many ways. A second principle, often neglected in today's culture, is the primacy of the common good. At times individual rights, property, and behavior must cede to the common good. Other social principles include subsidiarity and solidarity. Some call this socialism but it is at the heart of Christianity since the time of the earliest Church.

Each of us lives on this earth for a short span of years. We are challenged to become mature human beings by learning to love and learning to care for each other, not just our family or neighborhood, or country, but all people.

What is the lesson from today's gospel for all of us? Jesus puts it very directly at the end of today's story of the Good Samaritan. "Go and do likewise," Jesus says. "Go and do likewise."

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