

## OUT OF THE RUT

### *Sermon for Pentecost 8—Lk 10:25-37*

LPC, 7/14/13

I had my first ballet lesson when I was about 5 years old. I don't know what happened, because my mother was usually a half-hour early for everything, but she got me there after the lesson had already started. The class had finished its barre work, and little girls were lining up to pirouette across the floor, one at a time.

This is a classic stress situation: to arrive on a scene where everyone else but you knows exactly what's going on and where you know no one. But at that point in my life I was outgoing, so I began to look down the line of little girls to see who I would try to befriend. At the end of the line was an undersized, homely child. I resolved that whoever else I decided to be friends with, it would *not* be monkey-girl.

So guess who was the first one to smile at me, to ask me my name, to clue me in as to what the drill was? Right. At five years old, I had my first Good Samaritan lesson. Help sometimes comes from unexpected places.

This is certainly one message to take from the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan: Help sometimes comes from unexpected places. There are other messages here. The message for many of us is: "We should help people in trouble." This is a good lesson. Let me just add a warning label.

Beware "shoulds." For those for whom Christian morality consists of "shoulds," this may be an alarming thing to hear a preacher say. Let me explain. In my opinion, "shoulds" are to be avoided. "Shoulds" have a tendency to shame. But worse still, "shoulds" tend to remain "should" rather than becoming "dids."

To paraphrase the Jedi master Yoda (some of you will know who I'm talking about, some will not, but it takes too long to explain): "Do or do not do. There is no 'should.'"

But there are other messages we can take from the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' Jewish listeners would have identified with the fallen man, the Jewish robbery victim, rather than the Samaritan. Jesus knew this. His message to his fellow Jews was surely to regard Samaritans as neighbors and equals before God.

This message would have been very, *very* counter-cultural. It wasn't that Samaritan religion and Jewish religion were that different. They had started out from the same root. It's just that Samaritans in the North assimilated more of the local polytheism than Jerusalem-based Jews in the South did. Because of this assimilation, Jerusalem Jews regarded Samaritans as apostates and their religion as an abomination. Only a feud between brethren could be so bitter.

For Jews to call Samaritans neighbors, to identify on any plane with Samaritans, would be as if we Christians were to identify with Muslims, or Mormons, or Moonies: people with whom we share a lot of basic belief, but who we feel strongly got seriously off-track at some point.

Clearly a central message of Jesus' parable is to broaden our definition of "neighbor," in the sense of people we love as ourselves. But there is yet another message that may be taken from this story.

I might not have been so attuned to this final lesson if I had not been on an Ignatian Retreat this past week. The lesson to which I tumbled this week is this: Sometimes it takes someone different from you to pick you up out of a rut and get you back on the road. In my case I didn't feel like I was in a rut so much, but with the help of my director for this retreat, I began to see my way clear to a spiritual breakthrough.

Now, my director is not so very different from me. She is certainly *not* from a class of people that I despise and distrust, the way Jews despised and distrusted Samaritans. But my director and I do have a lot in common: we are of the same generation and gender, we both have a Christian underpinning and a spiritual inclination, but her life as a Roman Catholic sister is clearly different from mine. There was enough difference for her to offer a vantage, which helped budge a spiritual roadblock I've been dealing with for years.

I hope this personal story has something with which you can identify: sometimes it takes someone who is unlike you to get you out of a rut. I hope my sharing my experience may move you to seek and accept guidance from unexpected sources.

Certainly in seeking a confidant, you need someone sympathetic: someone who will understand and respect you. But it's not always best if the person just endorses all your feelings and actions. If I had told a close friend about my own spiritual roadblock I might have heard, "Oh, don't worry about that—you're basically a good person." Or "Oh, everyone does that. You're no worse than anyone else." And the roadblock would have remained. It took someone with a little distance to break a decidedly uncreative cycle.

Think of it this way: A recovering drug addict cannot stay straight by hanging out with other users. To continue in recovery an addict needs someone who is sympathetic, but different - someone who understands addiction first-hand, but who is now clean.

So I leave you with this thought: Sometimes you need someone who is somewhat different from you to help you out of a rut and back on the road.

Don't forget: this is no ordinary road, but the way to eternal life.