

15 Sunday Ordinary Time C 2016

July 11

Fraze/Callaway

My high school buddy Bob was on vacation when his sewer backed up. It took him two days to get home. When he pulled into his driveway, he saw on the curb a mountain of carpet and sheetrock and ruined furniture. As soon as the sewer had receded, his neighbors gathered and began the cleanup. When Bob entered his home, the only thing he smelled was bleach; the only thing he heard was the sound of fans in the basement. If these were not gift enough, there was a plate of fresh cookies on the kitchen table. Bob had good neighbors. And to be a good neighbor, you have to be willing to get your hands dirty from time to time.

The priest in the gospel story (of the Good Samaritan) was not a good neighbor. He had allowed his religious fervor to obscure his vision of mercy, hastening past the roadside victim. No doubt he was remembering that he who touched a dead man was unclean for seven days (Num.19:11). He could not be sure, but he feared that the man was dead; to touch him would mean losing his turn of duty in the Temple; and he refused to risk that. The Temple and its liturgy meant more to him than the life and pain of a stranger. The priest would not get his hands dirty. Good neighbors are willing to get their hands dirty from time to time.

The parable notes that both the priest and the Levi moved to the other side of the road as they passed the man who fell victim to robbers. This is a vivid image: Have you gone out of your way to avoid contact with someone? When I was the priest in Ada, I heard stories of how Fr. Miller and Pastor Larson would move to the other side of the street if either saw the other coming. I had a wedding rehearsal at which the main concern of the bride and groom was to make sure that the divorced parents wouldn't come close to one another.

It could be that the very person you are intent on avoiding is in need of your mercy. This was true for the priest and the Levite. Each had good reasons to justify their actions. From the perspective of Jesus, their good reasons were not good at all—if you want to be a good neighbor, you have to get your hands dirty, to risk, to be humble and to love.

A neighbor hauls out sewer-stained carpet; a neighbor helps an injured stranger; a neighbor advocates for a neglected child; a neighbor visits the lonely elderly; a neighbor works hard to protect the unborn and the vulnerable; a neighbor is first to offer a hand in reconciliation. From changing dirty diapers to cleaning wounds with oil and wine, good neighbors get their hands dirty.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation: Jesus not only soiled his hands in loving us, his hands were pierced for us. He counted us worthy of the blood of his cross. We ought to look in the eyes of our neighbors and find them worthy of everything mercy requires.