

Embody the Good Samaritan

By Archbishop John C. Wester, People of God, March 2017

In these past few weeks, we have seen the immigration debate in our country reach new levels of emotional intensity, an intensity that often creates more heat than light. In response to the presidential executive orders regarding immigrants and refugees coming to the United States and those already here, some are elated, others scared and still others confused. The conversations I have been hearing often revolve around a concern for the rule of law, the fear of newcomers bringing acts of terrorism to our land and the desire to protect and preserve our way of life. These are not unimportant issues, but they are complex and they do not admit to easy solutions. For more than ten years, I have been speaking and writing about these very points, laying out the Catholic Church's teaching about welcoming the stranger in our midst. In studying these issues, I am convinced that we can build bridges, not walls, that we can keep our country safe and our culture intact, and that we can find a path toward comprehensive immigration reform that respects the rule of law and still welcomes those who come to our shores, those who quite often are fleeing violence, persecution and hardship.

In all honesty, however, I find that when I am "speaking to the choir" there is great agreement with my position and when I am speaking to those who hold a completely divergent view then my facts, figures and statistics do little to change hearts. What changes hearts is the telling of the human story, encountering another's heart and putting a face on the facts, figures and statistics. Furthermore, what changes hearts is the Gospel and that is my first duty: to proclaim the Gospel "in season and out of season" so that the light of Christ can illumine our immigration conversations and debates.

In that vein, I have been praying over Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37). It occurs to me that the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan had to decide whether or not to help the victim of robbers who was left half dead in light of the laws of the time, the genuine fear of getting involved in a violent episode and the desire to maintain their quality of life without risking their good reputation, their property and their peace of mind.

In Jesus' time, the religious laws governed every aspect of a person's life. There were purification laws that prohibited touching a dead body and engaging with people from other ethnic groups. The priest and the Levite could have rendered themselves unclean for touching the victim and the Samaritan could be liable for rendering the victim unclean if the latter were Jewish. Furthermore, it was dangerous to get involved in these types of situations. The roads were filled with robbers and unscrupulous people. Furthermore, if they stopped to help the unfortunate victim, they could be accused by his family of being the perpetrator. It was risky to offer help in such circumstances. And of course, it was far easier to just keep going. Why risk the security of their lives, why spend hard earned money on a stranger, why not just take care of yourself and avoid trouble? In other words, Jesus is fully cognizant of the laws and fears and desire for self-preservation that all three travelers had to take into consideration. Jesus knew that his audience would most probably agree that the priest and Levite were well within their rights – and even being prudent – to just keep going. Imagine their shock when Jesus said that the Samaritan stopped and helped the victim. And to make the point even more dramatic, it was a

Samaritan, the hated enemy of the Jews, who offered help. And why? Because he had compassion for the hapless victim. Jesus says that the Samaritan was moved with compassion. He was moved beyond the limitations of the law, the paralysis of fear and the suffocation of self-centered interest to help a fellow human being in need. Jesus does not in any way dismiss the law, the fear, the desire for security. Rather, He holds up for imitation the heart of compassion that somehow finds a way to turn a passerby into a neighbor. Jesus is not abrogating the law, mitigating the fear or attenuating the desire for self-preservation. Rather, He is giving us a new law, a new freedom, a new way of living that finds its foundation in love and in compassion. There comes a time when we must act heroically out of compassion. Just laws and appropriate fears and enlightened self-interest serve a valid purpose in our day-to-day living. But compassion allows us to move beyond the norm and to follow a higher law that removes all fear and finds new life in surrendering our own interests as we put ourselves last and others first.

The Samaritan, Jesus tells us, became a neighbor to the victim. He followed his heart and through his action of mercy proved himself a neighbor. That is what discipleship is all about. It is about acting with love and compassion at all times, especially when our fellow human beings call to us in need. I understand that our country is locked in a fierce debate on this issue. There are many elements to the debate. But there is one element that must never be missing: compassion. Just as we exercise great passion in defending the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death, so must we do all that we can to stand shoulder to shoulder with our immigrant brothers and sisters who are seeking to live. Their lives are sacred and we must do all that we can to protect them from the various challenges they face.

I find it compelling that Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in answer to the question of the young lawyer, "Who is my neighbor?" For Jesus, the answer moves beyond legalities, fears and self-interest. Rather, it has to do with the preeminence of compassion. "Go, and do the same yourself" Jesus tells the young lawyer. In other words, be compassionate. We can debate all we want, but if we do not have compassion, then we are missing the point all together.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan. 29But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30Jesus replied, "A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. 31⁺ A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. 32Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. 33But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. 34He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. 35The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, 'Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.' 36Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" 37He answered, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."