

**Sermon at Our Lady of Dallas**  
**July 14, 2013**  
**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time**  
**Fr. Stephen Gregg**  
**Luke 10:25-37**

This parable is first of all an answer to a question, and not a bad question, really: “Who is my neighbor?” See, the scholar of the law has pin-pointed what really is the great difficulty of doing what we need to do in order to inherit eternal life: how to love our neighbor? who is our neighbor? Loving God with heart and soul, mind and strength, sounds okay, because God is there and is always God, and I just do my best, and I basically feel satisfied, and he doesn’t seem to complain—in the dialogue of our love of God, at least he seems to be a sturdy and consistent partner. But not so my neighbor: there are many different people in many different situations, in many different relationships with me, and it is not at all easy to figure out exactly what I’m supposed to be doing—and even if I dedicate myself to loving a particular person, it takes time and sometimes a good attempt just fails, or totally changes direction halfway through. Loving other people is not always as clear an operation as we would like: and maybe that is why the story is here in the first place: not because we want to make fun of a Jewish scholar whom Jesus showed up, but because we continue to ask his question. Of course, we hope not to share his attitude: the scholar of the law seems to have an answer already: he asks the question «to justify himself», his behavior, his idea for solving the problem of brotherly love. With his parable, Christ turns the man around to a new question, and a new answer.

The parable guides the listener in two directions. First, Christ indicates that the question to ask is not, “Who is my neighbor?” It’s not about finding someone who already *is* our neighbor. The question is, “Who becomes a neighbor, who makes himself into a neighbor?” In other words, our job is to put ourselves next to

people, to get close, to be their neighbors, rather than expect them to be our neighbors first. We fail at that; and that is why we see ourselves in the figures of the priest and the Levite who pass by on the other side, who distance themselves from the man who was robbed—they too are worried about robbers, maybe, and want to get down to Jericho and back as quickly and safely as possible. Christ teaches, however, that there are no prerequisites that others must complete before we let them be our neighbors; no, anyone can be our neighbor, if we move towards them. You don't wait for a sick person to come visit you; for a homeless person to get his act together first; for an immigrant to adapt first to his new home; you don't wait for a child, or a student, or a friend to be good, to make perfect sense, to understand you perfectly, to express himself perfectly, before you start offering him your whole heart, being, strength, and mind. The first direction, then: it's not about who your neighbor is, but about who you make your neighbor. The Samaritan takes the first step, though it messes up his trip.

There is a second way in which Christ answers the man's question. The question was, "And who is my neighbor?" The answer, "Your neighbor is the one who has mercy on you." Jesus convinces the man to put himself in the position not of the Samaritan, but of the man who fell among robbers: he leads us to realize that we are the ones who need neighbors, we are half-dead, we are poor. Your neighbor, he tells him, is the one who has mercy on you. Who has mercy on us? God has mercy, Christ has mercy. He has washed our wounds with wine and oil, given us his own beast to ride, taken us to shelter, paid the cost for our stay, left someone to care for us, and promised to come back and settle accounts. In Christ, God makes himself our neighbor. His commandment of love is not too high for us, because he crosses over to our side of the road to bring to fallen man the perfection of love in himself, the Spirit of love poured out on man in Christ's own Body. The words of this parable revealed the outline of his figure, an image which he filled in

with the fullness of his divine love by giving up his life for mankind; we still hear his words, and in faith we glimpse his outline; and we welcome the fullness of his presence in the mystery of the Eucharist. He comes to us again to lift us from the side of the road and enable us to “go and do likewise,” he comes to us to make us like himself, to make us Good Samaritans.

After this mass, you will say, “That is where the homily should have ended.” But there is another figure I think we are compelled to consider. Because imitating the Good Samaritan is hard: it cost Christ his life. If we rightly discern and persevere in our vocations, we will find that moment when we can fully give ourselves up like that. But in the meantime, there is this other figure, this other example: the innkeeper. He is the one left taking care of the man left for dead, and who knows how many other guests on that road. He must ask himself, “Who are these people? Who are these wounded guests that God continually drops into my life?” He gives his life for those who have not yet arrived at their destinations, or who barely know where they are going. He gives his life to building up a little community, a temporary thing, sure, nothing grand. He is not out crossing every road looking for the victimized; he finds enough just by staying where he is. He tells himself, “I’m doing this for that Samaritan, like I promised, however long it takes for him to come back, and however more than two silver coins I’ve got to waste on these people.” I have always imagined the innkeeper being a terribly jolly man; he knows he must be, to makes his inn a homely house in an otherwise violent, unfriendly place. And then he retires or passes away, and people still come by the inn but they say, “It’s just not like it used to be when the old innkeeper ran the place.”

I feel compelled to mention this figure, because a few days ago, we lost one of our best innkeepers, Fr. Matthew. God did not let Fr. Matthew have a home of his own: his father died when he was young, and from the tides of history it must

have seemed to him like the whole world was trying to make sure he did not have a future: his country was taken over, he was forbidden to go to school, to go to seminary, his monastery was closed, his superiors imprisoned. And he ended up in Texas. Maybe the two silver coins God left Fr. Matthew in his life did not seem like enough to build a home with, but like the innkeeper he did not hesitate to spend much more than those two silver coins, because of the one who promised to repay. Even after Fr. Matthew couldn't teach, you would still find him at the entrance to the lunchroom, at the entrance to the library, at the entrance to the chapel—working until the very end like the innkeeper at the door, always there to make sure that when someone arrives, he feels at home, feels like someone is waiting for him.

I know it's not quite the moment to praise Fr. Matthew. It's only to say this: if it ever seems questionable that our life as Christians works, or that we can really make it to the end, or that a community can really work, can really become a home, is really worth spending a lot more on than just the two coins we start with, if that is ever doubtful to us, we have a lot to encourage us and kindle our love: we have not only Christ's words, and Christ's own life, Christ's presence in the Scriptures and in the Sacraments; we also have Christ's presence in our own experience: we have seen it work, we have seen what simple and steady obedience to God's will can make even of a simple and practical man. Christ is not far from us or from this place; he is very near, already in our mouths and in our hearts.