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St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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“God is tasking us to foster compassion and empathy – to be the “good” Samaritan. The Samaritan is our role model for Christian behavior, of what a disciple of Jesus ought to be and do.”

Deuteronomy 30: 9-14

Psalm 25: 1-9

Colossians 1: 1-14

Luke 10: 25-37

Why does injustice seemingly persist? Why does evil often prevail? Is God impotent in the face of suffering? Over the past twenty centuries, as humanity has continued to strive in understanding its purpose and function in the world, there have emerged a variety of theological and philosophical answers to those questions. Since the dawn of the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity and even into our post-modern world, there are those who will answer these questions by suggesting that God is simply an imagined entity of our own making, created to assuage our fears; that God is not real or verifiable, and that we must, of our own volition, work to address the injustice and evil of our own making. Now, somewhere between the theological response and modernity's philosophically nuanced response, I believe, lies Truth.

I cannot disparage someone for holding the view that God is a fantasy since there is much in this world which gives credence to such an understanding. I am, however, discouraged by the underlying social/ political causation of said view: the rise of individualism. Part of what concerns me is that reliance upon one's *self* as the sole arbitrator for sourcing value does not allow for an objective accountability. In effect, our values depend only on our whims, as well as biases, which are fleeting at best. When we have no value system to believe in, to trust in, other than ourselves we are seemingly left with the twin pillars of narcissism and

nihilism – we are left with the “self” personified as a disconnected / disassociated individual solely dependent on their own merit. Trust in one’s self rather than God, becomes the mantra.

Solely relying upon one’s self is an essential part of the problem when it comes to faith in God because God is not a “self.” God is not an individual, nor is God a being or even a non-being. These terms fail spectacularly in their effort to capture the essence / nature of God and do give credence to the naysayer’s dismissal of any notion of a divine presence. Rather, God is a paradox. Instead of a “self,” this divine presence is a plurality of one, a relational quantity of three in One. As such, my Christ in faith gives me a value system predicated upon a relational God as embodied in the Trinity – a singular community, a paradoxical paradigm of relationship.

Hence, in this iteration, we have two value systems to consider: one based on individual accommodation and reliance on the self, which often leads to chaos and anarchy for a community; and the other centered in a Triune God whose desire for relationship ever emanates outward fostering and forming community. That is not to say that organized religion, which is an oxymoron, is itself the source of any value system. There is nothing organized about religion nor is there anything truly ultraistic about it. Matter-of-fact it is often guilty of being self-serving, akin to narcissism and nihilism. No, the source of any value system is found in the heart of a God who is relational: Triune in nature and substance; and revealed through Scripture, and all creation.

When I think of this paradoxical paradigm of a relational God whose ultimate desire is towards deepening relationship, I think of a small pebble that is dropped into the center of a still pond, observing the concentric ripples that emanate from its plunge going ever outward in circles touching all in its ever-widening radiance. Everything is touched and embraced by those ripples which originate at the point of entry where the stone (the God-head) enters the pond – the water of life. Nothing in itself remains untouched, everything is enveloped, thus rendering the self-in-isolation mute. If this is true, if our value system is belief (trust) in a God whose Triune nature emanates ever outward fashioning relationship with all, then the question from today’s Gospel becomes imperative: *Who is my neighbor?*

Countless numbers of people have endeavored to answer that question such that its familiarity renders most of us numb. “Of course we know who our neighbors are,” we tell ourselves. Oddly enough, most of those identified neighbors often look like us, sound like us, have similar political/social/ religious positions as we do. I do not think that is what Jesus had in mind when he told this now overly familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

I want to take a different approach to this question of “Who is my neighbor?” One that challenges each of us to confront our comfortable answers. To do that, I turn to Jane Elliot, anti-racism activist and educator, who pioneered an experiment in the late 1960s entitled ‘Brown eye / Blue eye’. In the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Elliot sought to help her students understand race-relations by empowering those in her class with brown eyes with the understanding they were superior to their classmate with blue eyes. She did so with stunning results and helped elucidate how racism works – how it is an infectious system of domination. She also tried different exercises with audiences throughout her career as a public speaker. In one such event she asked her all-white audience to please stand up if they wanted to be treated as a black person is treated as the current culture treats them. No one stood up. She chided them and repeats the question. According to how our culture treats people of color, do you want to be treated as a black person is treated? If so, please stand up. Again, no one stood. The exercise is poignant as she addresses the audience with this truth: no one stood up because they know how people of color are treated in the present culture and they do not want to be treated likewise. If that is true, if you know there is this injustice thrust upon others solely because of their ethnicity, why, then, are you doing nothing to change the system? That is the question she asks.

Elliot’s approach to racism is equally adaptable to other “isms.” For example, the questions each of us must ask of ourselves are such: Am I willing to trade places with a Native American knowing how our current culture treats them? Am I willing to trade places with a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual neighbor knowing how our culture treats them? Am I willing to trade places with a trans person knowing how they are currently treated in our culture? Am I willing to trade places with an immigrant fleeing political unrest knowing how our culture currently treats them?

The answer to the biblical question of “Who is my neighbor?” now becomes very obvious. The person no one in the story would trade places with is the Samaritan. This individual embodies for us all our cultural stereotypes, all the “isms” that separate and segregate our society. And it is this very oppressed person who acts with compassion and empathy towards the other who is suffering and in need of companionship. The very person who is crying out is heard by a person who is themselves oppressed yet responds to the needs of the other.

It is not that God is absent or impotent; that God allows injustice and suffering to prevail. This is not about a philosophy enshrined in intellectualism (a matter of the head) nor is it about a theology enshrined in piety (a matter of the heart). Those are simply two poles at either end of a continuum. The biblical approach places God as aligned with the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the marginalized. As such, the Samaritan is that very person who acts as God’s instrument of compassion and empathy. Only the Samaritan does something to change the other’s situation. Only the Samaritan seems to understand how the culture is treating the other because of that other’s “ism.” Only the Samaritan is willing to do something to bring about change to an unjust structure.

That is what our baptismal covenant entails when we promise to seek and serve Christ in all people, loving one’s neighbor as one’s self; to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. Our covenant is an invitation to align with those with whom we would not trade places with due to how our culture treats them. Who is your neighbor? The person you are unwilling to trade places with, knowing how they are being treated. That is your neighbor. God is ever present in creation; God is present in the instruments of creation –particularly humanity, who bears God’s image. God is tasking us to foster compassion and empathy – to be the “good” Samaritan. The Samaritan is our role model for Christian behavior, of what a disciple of Jesus ought to be and do. Go, therefore, and do likewise for your neighbor.