

HOMILY – FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 11, 2010

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“He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them”

Have you ever been a Good Samaritan? This gospel story is so well-known that it has become part of our descriptive language for helping one in need. Sure, we have been Good Samaritans, haven't we? We have reached out to someone in need. We have done this as a community in response to the earthquake victims in Haiti and more recently in Chile.

But, have there been times when we were the priest or Levite in the gospel story? Passing by someone in trouble, looking the other way, crossing to the other side of the road to avoid getting involved? I have, and I bet you have too.

Sometimes life is just a little too messy to get really involved - to kneel down in the dirt and enter the suffering of another. We live with this tension all the time. There is a temptation to keep ourselves pure and unstained by the world, and in so doing we separate ourselves from it, not loving it, not leaving ourselves vulnerable as Jesus did to feel its pains.

I remember facing this tension a number of years ago when I was working with the Ministry to the Deaf in Norwich. I had an office in a building that housed the handicapped ministries of the Diocese. There had been talk of using our space for St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen which needed to move out of a storefront that was being leased by the Diocese. The plans didn't seem imminent, but while I was away for an extended retreat the move was made. When I came home I was a totally surprised and quite angry to find out that I no longer had an office.

Our desks and phones had to be set up temporarily by the front entrance. Every day lines of street people, the winos, the homeless, the down and out, persons with mental problems, passed by our desks as they came in for the noonday meal. I had been used to my private space and had never experienced a close proximity with people like the ones passing by me. I was angry with those who made the change while I was away. I was not comfortable associating with those people.

To make a long story short, it was a blessing in disguise. Slowly, these people would speak to me. They called me by name. Gradually, I learned their names and started to interact with them. It took me a while, but eventually I would sit down and partake of the noonday meal with them. Later, I realized that it was the Lord in these poor people who was drawing me into the reality of life. I began to recognize my own inner poverty and needs, and came to the conclusion that I was a lot like them. The interesting development from this experience was an invitation to make a visit to Haiti. I chuckle now when I think of it, because it wasn't enough for the Lord to draw me into the lives of the poor of Norwich, he wanted me to enter the world of the poor of Haiti.

You know what, even after all these years and numerous trips to Haiti that tension still exists. Sometimes I still want to choose to be the priest or Levite of the gospel and forego being the Good Samaritan. I like my comfortable lifestyle. I am always tempted to keep separated from this other world. But the Lord is teaching me that it is by entering into the suffering world of my sisters and brothers, whether it is in Haiti or in Rockville or Tolland or wherever people are in need, there I am to truly find life.

In the gospel story Jesus is teaching us how we are to be in solidarity with the world around us. As his followers we look to him as our model of one who came among us. He did not keep himself distant from us. Jesus immersed himself in our everyday life. He would walk with sinners, eat with them, embraced them, forgave their sins, feel that pain and chaos of sin, but not sin himself. In doing so, Jesus blessed the world's goodness, its energy, its color, its zest, and its moral strength. Jesus could challenge the world too and he did. His holiness touched the world and brought healing, strength and new life.

Our world needs Christians who follow Christ and have the strength to walk within the world, right inside the chaos of sin itself, without sinning themselves. Jesus calls us to be those people. If we risk entering into the world of those in need, we will find Jesus there. For that is where he has come to dwell. And there also we will find the meaning of our own life.