

Pentecost 7, Year C
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Luke 10:25-37
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As Christianity grew and developed in the western world, and ultimately became not just a legal but the official religion of the Roman empire and later of the various European states that emerged from the remnants of empire, there developed a more and more pronounced emphasis on right thinking or “orthodoxy” rather than right acting or right disposition of the heart or soul. Long after Europeans stopped excommunicating, persecuting and even killing each other over what we today see as small, even insignificant points of doctrine we still see the effect of this emphasis. For today there are many Christians who remain convinced that right relationship with God is not possible unless one is Christian, and by Christian at least a few of these folks mean not just one who is baptized, but one who holds to very specific beliefs about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

This view creates immense difficulties, especially in the recently concluded 20th century, but it is not my purpose to address those difficulties now. Rather, I bring this up because, a few often quoted passages notwithstanding, orthodoxy, or “right thinking” of this sort, was not highly valued by the authors of our gospels. An overwhelming percentage of the time

the Gospels present us with a Jesus who is concerned primarily with the disposition of one's heart, and the life that emerges from that disposition, not the opinions in one's head, and the ideas that emerge from those opinions.

Today's passage from St. Luke's gospel, the story of the Good Samaritan, stands as one of the most compelling examples of this emphasis, and so this morning I want to look at it with the specific idea in mind of examining what it tells us about this "head vs. heart" controversy that is still with us today. I realize there are lots of other ways to examine this passage, but this path, which is perhaps a little less explored than some others, is nevertheless worth a careful look.

The context of the story is a question from a lawyer: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The response is that we are to love God and love neighbor. To this point there is nothing unique about the answer. Scripture summarizes the law in just that way; Rabbis and other teachers often said that love was the heart of the matter, St. Paul told us that love fulfills the whole law, and as the centuries went on people such as Dame Julian of Norwich offered the exact same teaching. Were this all there is to the story there would be little to suggest that we have anything new, or even interesting. But, because this is Jesus, or at least Luke's understanding of Jesus, the story indeed gets interesting immediately. For the lawyer, as lawyers sometimes do, asks a follow-up question: "And who is my neighbor?" It is this questions which evokes the

story of the Good Samaritan, and with that story offered in this context, everything changes.

For Samaritans were a genuinely despised group among the Jewish people. Most likely they were the people left over after the Assyrians swept through and wiped out the ten northern tribes of Israel hundreds of years before. Ethnically therefore they were mixed, and their religion consisted of a few recognizably Jewish practices, together with what they had gotten from the East, but they rejected Jerusalem as the spiritual center, and worshipped instead upon Mount Gerazim. They were, in other words, worse than non-believers; they were schismatics, heretics as it were, and no good Jew would have anything to do with any of them.

Yet it is one of these people, a man with all the wrong genes, all the wrong practices and beliefs, all the wrong life style, all the wrong everything when you get right down to it, that Jesus identifies as neighbor. And when Jesus then says “go though and do likewise” he is simply destroying the limits of who neighbor is, for neighbor is anyone who needs you, and therefore the whole concept of neighbor has nothing to do with who you are, what you believe, how you live, the values you have in common. The notion of neighbor in this story extends to the very limits of our common humanity, and binds us together as one. In this remarkable assertion the story of the Good Samaritan is completely consistent with the story of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25,

where the sheep are identified not as those who had all the right ideas, or those who observed all the proper rituals. The sheep are identified entirely on the basis of how they treated the powerless, the dispossessed, the marginal and even expendable people of society. Again we see the same thing with the story of the Rich man and Lazarus, in which the rich man perishes not because he is evil or irreligious, but because he was able to overlook the destitute person at his very gate. The perspective of story of the Good Samaritan is thus not unique to this moment in scripture, and not even eccentric with respect to the overall message of the gospels. On the contrary, the message of shared humanity, of the truth that the whole world is neighbor, stands at the center of the Good News.

But it gets worse in this story. For among those who pass by and offer no help are two religious people, who know perfectly well that to touch blood, no matter what the cause, renders them ritually impure for a time and disqualified from participating in the religious rituals that form the center of their observance. So we see two people whose religion, which is the means by which they seek to enter into a rich and saving relationship with God, deterred by their adherence to that very religion from doing the one thing that is truly the hallmark of the saving relationship they seek. It is religion that blinds them to the neighbor in front of them, religions that keeps them from understanding what they truly have to know about God in order to learn what love really is.

I would consider this a gratuitous slam on religion and religious leaders were it not for the fact that we have seen this point demonstrated over and over. It was religions conviction, or at least the patina of religious conviction, that motivated the 911 attacks, just as it was religion – or again the patina of religion – that has motivated violence among Christians for most of our history. We have all witnessed this in one way or another, and therefore know that the very faith most designed to bring us into a saving relationship with God has from time to time been distorted, disfigured into becoming a servant of the most dehumanizing campaigns.

This is precisely why the head and the heart must work together as we seek to deepen our spiritual lives. For when in the honest pursuit of truth people begin to interpret scripture, develop doctrines, define orthodoxy in a way that causes us to do anything from “pass by on the other side” as our story puts it, clear up to genuinely denying the basic humanity of other people, then the heart must step in and say “something is wrong, something is off here.” For there are two truths in this story that are repeated over and over again throughout scripture. The first is that we are all neighbor to each other at least some of the time. There are no limits to those we are called to love. The second truth is that our own search for clear and precise religious truth can at times blind us to this insight. Our hearts must never let our heads forget either of these things. We must never allow our pursuit of truth to entice us into

formulations that deny what we see in today's lesson, and in many other places in scripture.

None of this is to deny the value of doctrinal formulations, or to suggest they are only destructive. We know that isn't true. But it is to say that we must be careful how we use the whole notion of orthodoxy or "right thinking." The goal of doctrine is not to get us to the position where we have all the right ideas. That in fact is a very dangerous game to play. The goal of doctrine is to help move us to that place where the disposition of our souls is open to the love of neighbor, who is defined as anyone who needs us. We don't need the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, as a test to see who is worthy of God's love and who isn't. We need the doctrine of the Trinity to show us that God's self giving love extends to the very core of the human experience. When we use the doctrine of the Trinity to identify those who do not fall within the scope of that love then our hearts must tell us that we have used that doctrine wrongly. Head and heart go together in life as in religion, and we need stories like the one for today to help us understand that relationship and use it rightly.