

SERMON: THE GOOD SAMARITAN: Luke 10:25-37, November 12, 2017

In Deuteronomy 6:4-9 we read the important Jewish prayer called the “Shema” (‘Shema’ is the Hebrew word for ‘Hear,’ which is the first word of the prayer). The prayer begins like this: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.” In Leviticus 19:18 it says, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord.” When the lawyer tests Jesus in today’s Gospel and asks what he should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus gives the question right back to the lawyer. The lawyer is an expert in the Law and should already know very well the answer. There is no need for him to ask Jesus this question. The Lawyer responds with what would be considered the standard Jewish understanding. He recites from the Torah, or the Law, the Shema and the commandment from Leviticus. Every Jew knew this. The lawyer then continues to test Jesus by asking Him, “Who is my fellow, who is my neighbor?”

As an explanation and answer to the lawyer’s question, Jesus describes a scene of a man who is walking down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem was built on an elevation of 2,747 feet, whereas the city of Jericho is located 846 feet below sea level, a difference of about 3,300 feet in elevation. The straight line distance between the two cities is about 14 miles. It is actually longer because you have to walk up and down various hills to get from one city to the next. The road was famous and heavily used in Biblical times. David used this road to escape from the clutches of his son Absalom. During a trip on this road Jesus heals the blind man Bartimaeus. Jesus’ last journey to Jerusalem was made on this road. It was notorious for being difficult and dangerous to travel. Robberies often took place on this road. For this reason it was nicknamed “the way of blood.”

A man is beaten and robbed while walking down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is seriously wounded and left half dead on the roadside. We are told that a priest and a Levite walk by and ignore the man. Why? Were they just being mean? Were they just so indifferent to human suffering and human life? What about the commandment to love your neighbor? A Jew could not come in contact with a person who was bleeding. If they did, they would be considered ritually contaminated and impure. Remember the woman with the issue of blood who secretly touched the hem of Jesus’ garment? A priest and a Levite (the tribe from which the assistants of the priests were derived) would especially be affected. They could no longer enter the Temple or participate in its services. To rectify this situation, they would have to go through a series of difficult and time consuming cleansing rituals in order to be made ritually clean once again. Therefore, the priest and the Levite, tempted by these ritual laws, choose rather to pass by the wounded man than to assist him, even though he may even die without their help. Then a Samaritan passes by. The Samaritans were schismatics, and the Jews would have nothing to do with them. The Jews considered themselves to be superior to the Samaritans. It is this Samaritan who shows mercy, care and love for the wounded man. Ironically, the priest and the Levite, who are expected to be examples of righteousness, virtue and the commandments of God’s mercy and love, instead display cold indifference and lack of concern for their neighbor and fellow human being. Ironically, it was a stranger, an outcast, and the man who is considered low in social status who is the shining example of being Godlike and abundant in God’s mercy and love. It is possible to literally follow the Law, yet to be very un-Godlike. The story of the pharisee and the publican is very similar. The pharisee follows the letter of the Law, yet in actuality is very un-Godlike in his attitude and inner disposition. It is repulsive to watch and to listen to the pharisee, but we see God when we look and listen to the publican, from whom, because of his reputation, we expect quite the opposite.

Brothers and sisters, let us beware that we don’t behave like the priest, or the Levite, or the Pharisee in our attitude and actions. Let us instead imitate the way of the Samaritan and the

publican. Let us welcome all people, showing love, mercy and care for every person with whom we come in contact in our lives. Whatever we do, let us do it with love, faith and mercy. We will not be judged for being too merciful or for having too much love in our hearts and in our deeds. We will, however, be judged if we are cold and indifferent to our fellow human beings and their needs and sufferings. The Holy Fathers tell us that this Samaritan symbolizes Jesus Himself Who healed sinful mankind of our spiritual wounds. The Lord carries us to a safe place, which is the Church. He makes a payment for our care by suffering and dying on the Cross for us. Like the Samaritan, the Lord departs for a time and promises to return later. He will require a reckoning of those with whom He entrusts the responsibility and care for our souls. A reckoning will also be made for how we choose to behave and act towards each other, in word, deed and thought. May the Lord guide and help us to make the right choices in our lives and to love our fellow man. Amen.