

15th Week in Ordinary Time (Cycle C)

I hope this doesn't sound heretical, but there's a tendency in the Church, I think, to "overthink" Jesus' teachings. Yes, I like a bit of esoteric theology as much as the next guy. That said, Jesus could be remarkably straightforward in what he said and did.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a case in point. Augustine and some others, too, developed complex analogies to unpack the story of the Good Samaritan. Augustine, for instance, interpreted the man who was robbed as a type of Adam, the robber who injured him as a kind of devil, and the Good Samaritan as a model of Jesus. Augustine interpreted the parable of the Good Samaritan in cosmic terms. He viewed the story of the Good Samaritan through the lens of salvation history.

All well and good, I suppose. In contrast, however, others, including John Chrysostom, took Jesus at his word. According to John Chrysostom, Jesus was simply responding to a question: *"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* A very good question, indeed! And to a follow-up question, too: *"Who is my neighbor?"* Another good question, to be sure.

Let's go with John Chrysostom's more literal approach this (evening/morning/afternoon). No complex allegories, no dense catechesis... Let's simply take Jesus at his word. In adopting this more straightforward path, we'll follow, in fact, the wisdom expressed in our first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy: *"This command that I enjoin on you today,"* we are told, *"is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up in the sky, that you should say, 'Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?' No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts. You have only to carry it out."* Yes, *"you only have to carry it out."*

So what is this command to which the deuteronomist referred? And what precisely was Jesus telling the scholar of the law and – by proxy – you and me, too? Love of God and love of neighbor, sure. But more, too. In effect, Jesus reinterpreted an honored teaching from the Old Testament in a remarkable way, and he did so in the context of the follow-up question posed by the young scholar: *"Who is my neighbor?"* In a startling twist on an Old Testament teaching, Jesus asserted the need for compassion in how we think about and treat others. Compassion, *"a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for others who are suffering, together with a corresponding*

desire to help alleviate that suffering." And he did more, too. Jesus broadened the circle of those whom we should consider our neighbors to encompass virtually everyone, including most especially those to whom we are ill-disposed due to this or that event of history, our personal interest, or racial or cultural prejudice. Everyone!

So, following the more literal path laid out for us by John Chrysostom, how should we proceed? Well, here's an approach, a method promoted, in fact, by some evangelicals in the '90s. It's framed as a question: *"What would Jesus do?"* Yes, *"What would Jesus do?"* As a decision-making rule or discernment tool, we could do a lot worse. And, please, don't be put off by the fact that the WWJD acronym was popularized by evangelicals, who are, after all, our sisters and brothers in Christ. Thomas a' Kempis advocated the same approach in his 15th century classic, *The Imitation of Christ.* Again, *"what would Jesus do?"* And this decision-making rule or discernment tool was expressed by Jesus himself in John's Gospel: *"I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another."*

Yes, we would do very well, indeed, to ask: *"What would Jesus do?"* Or perhaps, *"How would Jesus express his love in this or that circumstance?"*

- And so, what would Jesus do if he was asked for food by someone who was hungry or water by someone who was thirsty? See the Judgment of Nations discourse in chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel.
- What would Jesus do if someone who had taken advantage of him over and over again asked for forgiveness? See Jesus' response to Peter on the need for forgiveness in chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel.
- What would Jesus do if he was confronted by a duly elected official who promoted cruel and vengeful acts but, nonetheless, "had the law" on his side. See the story of the woman about to be stoned in John's Gospel.
- What would Jesus do if he was physically threatened by someone? See the account of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane in any of the four Gospels.
- And finally, what would Jesus do if he was imposed upon by those who hated him or those who were reviled in his culture? See the parable of the Good Samaritan in today's Gospel reading.

In these and in so many other teachings and actions, Jesus clearly revealed what he would do if he was standing in our shoes. And here's the thing. As Christians, Jesus *is* our decision-rule. As Christians, Jesus *is* our discernment tool. We are Jesus' disciples. In this or that situation, we are to do what he would have done. In this or that situation, we are to love as he would have us love.

No, there's nothing complex about any of this. Demanding, yes. Challenging, for sure. Nothing complex, but life-changing and life-giving, nonetheless.