15\textsuperscript{th} Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C – July 10, 2016

\textit{“The Bridge to Eternity”}

Deuteronomy 30:10-14
Psalm 69:14, 17, 30-31, 33-34, 36, 37 or Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11
Colossians 1:15-20
Luke 10:25-37

There were once two dim-witted neighbors living across the river from each other. Jeb hated Clarence with a passion and Clarence hated Jeb equally as much. They had feuded with each other constantly and for so long that neither could really remember why. So bitter was their animosity toward each other that they would often throw rocks and other things across the river at each other. Then one day the Corps of Engineers came to survey both their properties in order to build a bridge across the river. Both Jeb and Clarence saw this as an opportunity to finally settle the feud once and for all by whoopin’ the other. So early one morning after the bridge was finished, Jeb started across the bridge to surprise and confront Clarence. A few minutes later Jeb returned home and his wife asked, “What happened? D’ya get ‘im?”

Jeb was pale white and said to his wife with a stunned look and stuttered speech, “I never really seen him up close and as I walked across the bridge there was a sign that made me think twice about what I’s about to do!”
“What’d it say?” His wife asked.

“It said ‘CLEARANCE 8FT 3IN’!”

Today Jesus and Moses speak to us about inheriting eternal life by adhering faithfully to the Law of God. In particular, and most importantly, they are calling us to love God with all our heart and all our soul. But in our Gospel Jesus takes this a step further by adding the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus is telling us that it is through our true love, compassion and care for our neighbor that we show our true love of God. I’m sure some of us in the course of our lives have had, or know people who have had, neighbors they just did not get along with, albeit hopefully not as badly as Jeb and Clarence. It can be very challenging to love our neighbors in such circumstances can’t it? What is even more challenging is Jesus calling us to look beyond these circumstances and our mere superficial understanding of who our neighbor is and what it means to “love” them. “Who is my neighbor?” and what does it mean to “love” them, these are the questions that the scholar asks Jesus and they are the questions that we are called to answer today.

To answer these questions for the scholar and those listening, Jesus tells them the parable of the “Good Samaritan”. This parable is so widely known that the term “Good Samaritan” is part of our common vernacular. In fact, laws regarding our responsibilities towards helping others in emergency situations are known as “Good
Samaritan Laws”. But we must be reminded that the lesson of the Good Samaritan is not just about helping someone in dire or sudden need. The lesson of the “Good Samaritan” is about overcoming preconceived notions, animosity, bitterness, prejudice, bigotry, ignorance and one’s own self-interest in order to aid someone we might not otherwise. This parable is meant to define, in extremely radical terms, who our neighbor is.

To understand this more fully we need to understand the degree to which Jews and Samaritans despised each other. The reasons they despised each other are many but less important than the way they manifested themselves. The Samaritans were considered a heretical and schismatic people related to the Jews who were detested more than even pagans by the Jews. As Fr. John McKenzie puts it in the book *The Dictionary of the Bible*, “There was no deeper breach of human relations in the contemporary world than the feud of Jews and Samaritans, and the breadth and depth of Jesus’ doctrine of love could demand no greater act of a Jew than to accept a Samaritan as a brother” (766). To understand the parable of the “Good Samaritan” we must understand that this was much more than just someone helping another in need; it was in fact, something extraordinary! Prejudice, bigotry, hatred were all set aside because another human being was in dire straits. It is in this way that Jesus identifies our neighbor as none other than our entire human race.
We are all made in the image of God. Let me repeat that, we are \textit{ALL} made in the image of God! It is in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the “\textit{image of the invisible God,}” as we heard in our second reading, that God joined Himself to the human race. God didn’t create beings incongruent to Himself but rather He created beings \textit{LIKE} Himself in order to share in our lives so that we could in turn share in His. Despite all our differences and diversity, humanity shares a common heritage and lineage in God the Father. Therefore, our neighbor is more than just a next door neighbor but rather our entire human family and every person. This may sound like a bunch of idealistic hog-wash but this is the message that Jesus is trying to convey in the extreme parable of the “Good Samaritan”.

This message and parable need to be shared and proclaimed as preconceptions, animosity, bitterness, prejudice, bigotry, ignorance are rampant all over the world and even in our own country right now. Race, ethnicity, religion, creed, color, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, political ideology and national identity are all being used to differentiate and segregate ourselves from ourselves to the point that our only neighbor \textit{IS} ourselves! In doing so, we not only separate ourselves from our human family but we are in fact separating ourselves from God as well.
Do not be mistaken though, the power of this parable is not just in the message but in the example. The “Good-ness” of the “Good Samaritan” was shown through his actions. He tended to the real needs of the victim on the side of the road because he “was moved with compassion.” In this way, he shows us “how” to love our neighbor through mercy in action.

We all have a real challenge before us today, not only in our readings but out in the world outside these walls. “Go and do likewise” Jesus says to the scholar and us at the end of the gospel. We must be the “Good Samaritans” in a world that often detests or is hostile to those who try to bring the message of Christ to it. This may be challenging and the solution of how to do this may seem elusive but as Moses told us in the first reading: “For this command that I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up in the sky…nor is it across the sea. No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out.” In other words, the bridge before all of us can be used like Jeb and Clarence in order to escalate hostilities, but that same bridge might also be set there before us as a divine path to eternal life. The choice belongs to each and every one of us to decide.