HOMILY FOR THE 28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – C

“And he was a Samaritan.” Now Jesus said many things that were shocking to his Jewish contemporaries, but probably none was more shocking that his use of Samaritans as examples of faith and virtue. Remember, many Jews and Samaritans had a real loathing for each other. Though they shared a common origin, there came a point in history where a separation had occurred. For the Jews and Samaritans this began way back in the tenth century B.C., when the united kingdom that had been established by King David, split into two nations – Judah in the South and Israel in the north.

Then in the eighth century B.C., Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. They destroyed its capital city, Samaria. Some of its inhabitants were exiled, while others continued to live in that land. Eventually foreigners, who practiced other religions, came and settled there too. Not surprisingly, before too long, Jews in the area began to marry Gentiles. They developed their own traditions – accepting the first five books of the Bible as scripture -- sometimes called the Books of Moses -- but nothing that was written thereafter. They held to the belief that Moses was the only true prophet, not accepting any of the prophets or any of the writings that came after Moses. They had their own temple and their own rituals. So they came to be looked upon by the Jews as Samaritan half-breeds who had perverted the faith of their common ancestors, while the Samaritans claimed that they were the ones who had remained faithful to their ancestral traditions and that it was the Jews who had perverted them. Needless to say, they didn’t like each other much.

It was precisely because of this that Jesus used a Samaritan as an example of faith and virtue in speaking to his fellow Jews. He knew that if the rift between Jews and Samaritans was ever going to be healed, he had to help his people see that Samaritans were also loved by God and that God was working among them too, to accomplish his saving purposes. This was a hard message for many of his fellow Jews to accept. And it is hard for many of his people now to accept that God is at work among the people of other religions to accomplish his plan of salvation. But this is a part of what respect for all life is about. We are to look upon the people of all religious traditions with profound respect.

This was driven home to me the other day when I saw the Holy Father’s tweet for that day. He said, “Ecumenical and Interreligious dialogue is not a luxury, but it is something which the world wounded by conflicts and division needs more and more.” This is consistent with what Pope Francis said at the very beginning of his pontificate, that “The Catholic Church is conscious of the importance of promoting friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions.” Of course, this can only happen if we acknowledge that God is indeed present and at work among the people of every religious tradition, and that we all have valuable things to contribute to one another.

Our Holy Father wants us to know that through respectful dialogue, through a genuine openness to one another, we can enrich each other’s lives. And surely he is right. Because God is at work among all the world’s people, there is always the awesome possibility that we can actually help one other on our journey to God. For instance, the well-known Trappist monk Thomas Merton once wrote of an experience of profound spiritual illumination he had while visiting a Buddhist holy place in India. In this place there were many statues of the Buddha both outside and inside a cave. And this is how Fr. Merton describes what he experienced in that cave. “I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed . . . then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge yet subtle . . . Looking at these figures I am suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, become evident and obvious . . . All problems are resolved and everything is clear . . .” (Asian Journal)
Now Fr. Merton didn’t become a Buddhist as a result of this experience. He continued to embrace the Christian faith wholeheartedly. But his life was greatly enriched because he had approached this Buddhist holy place with love and respect for those who hold to this religious tradition. And I know that when I have observed the people of other faith traditions in their holy places deep in prayer, I have felt strongly moved to become more prayerful myself. My own sense of the holy has become deepened and expanded.

Of course, it works the other way as well. I think I shared with some of you the experience that the Dalai Lama had many years ago when visiting Christian holy places. He writes, “On one occasion I went to Lourdes . . . I drank the holy water, stood in front of Mary’s statue, and thought that here, on this spot, millions of people find blessing or tranquility. As I looked at the statue of Mary, deep admiration and appreciation for Christianity arose within me . . . During this same trip I went . . . to the Virgin’s shrine at Fatima, in Portugal. There I had a mysterious experience. After laying a Tibetan scarf beneath the statue and after a period of silent meditation, I turned to leave but looked back for the last time and, unless something was wrong with my eyes, I actually saw Mary smiling at me. I felt a powerful surge of profound experience at that instant.”

To me, this is an awesome thing. While not becoming a Christian because of these experiences, the Dalai Lama’s life was greatly enriched because he had approached our Christian holy places with love and respect for those who hold to our religious tradition.

Please hear me when I say that I am not suggesting that one religious tradition is just as good as another. We wouldn’t be Catholics if we didn’t believe that our tradition holds a fullness of truth and a beauty that can be found in no other place. In fact, it is precisely because we believe this that we can reach out to those of other religious traditions with love and respect. For we know we have nothing to fear.

According to our Holy Father, it is part of our calling to enter into respectful encounters with people of other religious traditions. For respectful and compassionate interaction is the only way that we will create in them an openness to what we have to share about the God in whom we believe – the God who has made himself known to us in Christ. As we saw in the first reading today, it was because of the help he received from the Prophet Elisha, that Naaman the Syrian – the worshiper of the god Baal Rimmon -- came to say, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.” In other words, through the good Elisha had done for him, Naaman came to believe that the God Elisha worshipped – our God – is the one true God -- the God who has made himself known to us in Christ for our salvation and for the salvation of all the world.

Fr. Rod Damico
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