

## REFLECTIONS

### The Other Side of Christianity: The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Roy Keller, July 1, 2012

*The reflections were preceded by a skit reenacting the parable of the Good Samaritan. Following is the text of the parable as read by Director of Religious Education Lisa Fritsche while R.E. children and adult helpers acted the parts of the traveler, the thieves, the Priest, the Levite, and the Good Samaritan (from the King James Bible, Luke 10:25-37):*

*And, behold, a certain lawyer (that is, an expert in the law of Moses), stood up, and tempted Jesus, saying, "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"*

*Jesus said unto him, "What is written in the law? How readest thou?"*

*And the lawyer answering said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself."*

*Jesus said unto him, "Thou hast answered right: This do, and thou shalt live."*

*But the lawyer, (wanting) to justify himself, said unto Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

*And Jesus answering said, "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.*

*"And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.*

*"But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: And when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.*

*"And on the morrow, when the Samaritan departed, he took out two (silver coins), and gave them to the host, and said unto him, 'Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.'*

*(And Jesus said unto the lawyer,) "Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?"*

*And the lawyer said, "He that showed mercy on him."*

*Then said Jesus unto him, "Go and do thou likewise."*

*(Notes: Some pronouns were replaced with nouns for clarity. Also, the material in parentheses was added or substituted for clarity.)*

Thank you, Lisa, for a great skit.

I'd also like to commend Lisa and the R.E. teachers for the outstanding job they do in Religious Education. I've seen the materials they use ... they cover all the major religions. Lisa says they study a religion or a denomination, then go to that church/synagogue/temple here in Columbia to see and experience it first hand. She says that, coincidentally, they did a lesson on the Good Samaritan a month or so ago.

I'd also like to say, briefly, something about how important RE is, not only to promote understanding of other religions among our youth, but for their general education. Within the past six or seven years, two major polling organizations, Pew and Gallup, have done studies on the state of religious education and the degree of religious knowledge in U.S. high schools.

The consensus of the high school English teachers polled was that religious knowledge among U.S. high school students is not adequate. They are concerned because, as they point out, much of Western literature, music, art and history is based on or alludes to religion, specifically, in the case of U.S. students, based on the Judeo-Christian religion and the Judeo-Christian scriptures.

I need only mention several examples to make the teachers' point: Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," which is about various characters on a religious (Christian) pilgrimage to Canterbury; Milton's "Paradise Lost," "Paradise Regained," "Samson Agonistes"; allusions throughout Shakespeare, including the mention of the church restriction against suicide in "Hamlet"; Dante's "Divine Comedy" (Italian); and in the 20th century, John Steinbeck's "East of Eden" and "The Grapes of Wrath," which is about Oklahoma dust-bowl dirt farmers journeying to the Promised Land (California).

I wish I could spend more time on the results of those surveys.

Let me begin my main talk by saying why I'm here; that is, why I'm attending the Columbia UU Church. I've been attending pretty much non-stop since I first came about 21 months ago at Fran's (Reynolds) invitation, after joining her writing group.

First ... and I'm not sure this is a good reason to go to church ... I enjoy coming here: It's fun! It's a hapnin' place. There's always something fun going on, such as Larry (Lile) composing and singing a parody of "Runaround Sue" at Rev. Sue's farewell; Peter's wearing his Easter bonnet, with all the frills upon it, on Easter Sunday; good food and fellowship on First Sundays; good, fun music every Sunday; and really, really good people all the time. I've made a number of really good friends.

I also enjoy the UU commitment to social justice issues, such as the summer mission to Honduras and the petition drive to cap payday loan rates and raise the minimum wage.

And I'm very appreciative of how this church is so diverse, welcoming people of varied backgrounds and religious persuasions with open arms.

... Well, except for one group ... really two overlapping groups: Christians and those who believe in God, or want to remain open to belief in God, or a supreme being, or whatever that being might be called.

I'm told that when we did the church survey leading up to the calling of our new minister, that 20 percent of members/friends identified themselves as Christians. That might be dismissed as an insignificant number, but it does represent two out of every 10 ... two living, breathing people. I count myself, and did on the survey, count myself as one. I asked Rev. Sue early on if there were any Christians in the church, and she assured me there were. It got to be a bit of a running joke: I'd ask now and then, and she'd say, "Oh, yes, they're here."

But I've seen very little surface evidence of their presence. I think it's because they/we are made to understand that Christians are welcome but that they need to be seen and not heard.

In the 21 months I've been attending, I've heard negative comments, perhaps half a dozen, here and there along the way, about Christians and Christianity and about God, or that "higher power," as some might say.

And I understand that. I have problems myself with Christian theology, Christian scriptures, and events in the history of Christianity that are not pretty. To list a few: the inquisition(s); the Crusades; the Holocaust (perpetrated by a supposedly Christian nation); and then, in today's world, there's the Religious Right and their Taliban-like take on life and government.

Also there is the use of Scripture, both Old Testament and New Testament, to justify slavery ... the South quoted the Bible at great length during the Civil War to justify it. The Bible has been used for centuries to justify the subjugation of women: "Women are to keep silent in the church," and "women, obey your husbands." This is still a central tenet of fundamentalist churches. And of course the Bible has been and still is used to condemn homosexuality, to this day among the fundamentalists.

So I do understand the antipathy toward Christianity and share the embarrassment regarding those things.

That's the bad side of Christianity. And that bad side gets most of the publicity.

But there is the "other" side of Christianity, the good side, the side suggested in the title of this talk, the side I was fortunate enough to grow up in, which is why I cringe when I hear less-than-sensitive remarks about Christianity or God ... or anything Christian or even remotely "spiritual" in a Sunday service, God forbid!

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's examine the advertised Parable of the Good Samaritan, which I'm using to be suggestive of or representative of the best of Christianity; that is the compassion at the heart of the parable and at the heart of the "good" Christianity.

Why did I choose the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It's because I've always been fascinated with it, ever since I first heard it in Sunday school. But I really sat up and took notice of it when I heard the minister in my home town church explain why the Samaritan's stopping to help was so significant. The context here is important. The minister was saying this in the mid-to-late 1960s, at the height of the violence of the civil rights movement, during or just after the violence used by the white power structure in the South, the fire hoses, the dogs, the horses at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and the killings of civil rights workers.

The minister, speaking to an all-white congregation, said: "It would be like a black man stopping to help a white man."

Then not too long after that, I heard, from radio and TV, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. cite the Parable of the Good Samaritan to make exactly that same point, in his "I've Been to the Mountaintop," speech in Memphis, Tenn., on April 3, 1968, the night before he was killed. Let's first look at the parable itself, then we'll hear the portion of Dr. King's speech that dealt with the Good Samaritan.

There are a few helpful factoids to keep in mind to help with understanding the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

1. The Samaritans were a real religious entity, not a mythological construct. In fact, they still exist today, still practicing the same religion that made them so despised by the Jews of the first century. There are only about 700 left, most of them living in a village at the base of their holy mountain, Mt. Gerizim, in what is now the West Bank in Palestine. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews because, in the eyes of the Jews returning from the Babylonian Exile, the Samaritans had corrupted their ethnicity (Dr. King calls it their race) and their religion. In the absence of the Jews who had been taken into captivity, by first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, the Jews left behind in Palestine, in the area north and west of Jerusalem and the Jordan River, the area known as Samaria, began to intermarry with other peoples brought in to the area. And they changed the Jewish religion in certain aspects, such as the critical conception of where the Jewish holy mountain was (Mt. Gerizim for the Samaritans, but the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the Jews). So when the Jews, who had managed to maintain both their ethnic and religious purity, as they saw it, returned to what had been Israel, they found these interlopers, the Samaritans, whom they began to despise as being "impure."
2. The Jericho Road. Dr. King used the name metaphorically to signify life's road, which can be dangerous, as it certainly was for Dr. King. The Jericho Road of the first century was extremely dangerous, literally so. Its length was only about 17 miles, but it was fraught with danger. First, it was steep: It starts at Jerusalem, which is 2500 feet above sea level, and goes downward to Jericho, which is about 800 feet below sea level. And it was desert, deserted, rocky and rugged. It harbored robbers along the way, who could rob and sometimes murder their victims and disappear into the terrain.
3. The priest and the Levite. These were members of the Jewish religious establishment, as was the "lawyer" who questioned Jesus. The priests presided in the temple in Jerusalem (until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE), and the Levites were lay helpers in the

temple. Both were thus religious officials in the temple. Jesus' ministry was a fight against the power structure of the Jewish religion, his own religion, which he wished to make more humane. He thought the Jewish religious authorities were too hung up on legalisms, on notions of "outer" purity, such as the idea that touching a dead body made a person, certainly a priest or Levite, impure. (Marcus Borg, a member of the Jesus Seminar who spoke in Columbia this past winter, thinks that's the point of the Parable of the Good Samaritan: that Jesus was criticizing the Priest and Levite for avoiding the beaten man because he might be dead and thus "impure.") Jesus preached "inner" purity; that is, justice, humility and compassion, as demonstrated by the Good Samaritan.

There are two stories in the Parable of the Good Samaritan: One, the exchange between Jesus and the lawyer (an expert on the Mosaic law, thus a religious official), and two, the actual story of the Good Samaritan.

The "lawyer" was probably trying to trap Jesus into an impolitic answer. The Jewish religious authorities (lawyers, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees) were constantly portrayed in the New Testament as trying to trap Jesus with his words so they could arrest him and get him out of their collective hair. According to the New Testament, Jesus, in the eyes of the religious authorities, was leading the people astray, away from the orthodoxy of the Jewish religion of the time.

The story itself. I wish I could spend more time on it, but the central point is that while the two Jewish religious authorities, representing the Jewish religious power structure, passed by the injured and perhaps dying man, the Samaritan, despised by the beaten man (presumably Jewish), and by the Jewish "lawyer" questioning Jesus, had compassion and stopped to help a fellow human being in spite of the prejudice against him and the potential danger (a favorite ploy of robbers was for one of them to pretend to be injured in order to lure innocent passersby into stopping and thus becoming easy prey).

When Jesus had finished the story of the Good Samaritan, he asked the lawyer: "Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?" (The King James Version is the only poetic version of the Bible; it's the language of Shakespeare, published in 1611, during Shakespeare's lifetime.)

The Jewish lawyer grudgingly answered: "He that showed mercy on him." (You notice he couldn't bring himself to say, "The Samaritan.")

To which Jesus said, "Go and do thou likewise."

The lesson Jesus was teaching was clearly that as one travels life's road (represented by the dangerous Jericho Road), one must show compassion for all fellow human beings, no matter their ethnicity or religion, and no matter the cost or danger.

Which leads me to what Dr. King said about the Parable of the Good Samaritan in his last speech in his last night of life, the night in Memphis when he was speaking to the citizens of Memphis, mostly African American in the immediate audience in the church, urging them to support the striking sanitation workers, who were mostly African American. He told the audience that doing

so was dangerous (they might lose their jobs, for example, if they had white employers), but like the Good Samaritan, they must show compassion and do something concrete and real.

Here's the part of the speech where Dr. King cited the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

And Jesus talked about a certain man, who fell among thieves. You remember that a Levite and a priest passed by on the other side. They didn't stop to help him. And finally a man of another race came by. He got down from his beast, decided not to be compassionate by proxy. He got down with him, administered first aid, and helped the man in need.

The Jericho Road was a dangerous road. ... It's a winding, meandering road. It's really conducive for ambushing. ... And you know, it's possible that the priest and Levite looked over at that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around.

And so the first question the priest asked, the first question the Levite asked, was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"

But the Good Samaritan came by and reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

Dr. King was telling us all, the audience outside the church, that we must have compassion for our fellow man and help him in his need, in spite of the potential dangers on the "Jericho Road."

The UU Church of Columbia is good at doing that, at helping our fellow man. This church is constantly engaged in humanitarian acts, such as the summer mission to Honduras. The most recent such activity I remember is that some of our members were active in the petition drive to cap interest rates on payday loans and raise the minimum wage. But you know, there were Christians very heavily involved in that effort; in fact, if you look on the flyer, you will see the name of the organization behind the petition drive, CCO (Communities Creating Opportunity).

[Hold up the petition drive flyer.] The flyer shows Dr. King's image and quotes him in reference to the Good Samaritan and the "Jericho Road." It also gives the web address of the organization behind the petition drive, a coalition of Kansas City-area mainline churches - Methodists, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church USA, Episcopal, liberal Lutheran churches (ELCA), along with several Catholic churches and one Jewish synagogue.)

These Protestant churches, along with the American Baptist churches and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), are what are called the American Mainline churches. This designation signifies today that these are liberal, progressive churches, as much interested in social justice as in saving souls. Others in this tradition are the Quakers and some of the African American churches. My own background is in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

These mainline Christian churches have been involved in the struggle for social justice since the early 20th century, when the "social gospel" was a dominant concept in these churches. The social gospel was an effort to apply Christian ethics to issues of social justice, issues such as

women's rights, fair-labor practices, universal education, and, ultimately, the civil rights movement. Christian ministers were heavily involved in the protests and marches, as were UU ministers. I have read that there were more UU ministers in the Selma to Montgomery marches than any other single denomination.

Today, as then, these mainline churches are liberal and progressive: They accept evolution and oppose "creationism"; they ordain women; they are slowly but surely coming to accept gays and lesbians in their ministry as well as the laity; they accept "higher criticism" of the Bible; and they are accepting and tolerant of other beliefs, including the Jewish tradition. They are tolerant of ALL beliefs. (All these things are not true, of course, of every single member, but by and large it is so, and is true of the leadership.)

Allow me to briefly cite a bit of my personal church background, which I think is representative of the membership of all these mainline churches I have mentioned.

When I retired in 2008, I returned to my home town and my home town church, First Christian Church in Jonesboro, Arkansas. A woman was chair of the board; women served alongside the men as elders, and have as long as I can remember (this is certainly not the case in fundamentalist churches); they sent a team of volunteers two years running to New Orleans to help with Katrina cleanup ... I could go on. Two years ago last January (January 2010), the other Christian Church in Jonesboro, at the time an all-white congregation, called as their minister a woman ... an African American woman ... a single-mother of four young children African American woman, and she's still there, accepted and loved by the congregation.

The national administrative leader of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a woman, just re-elected to a second six-year term. Here in Columbia, First Christian Church has a Fair Trade Store; they feed the hungry; and last winter, they invited Marcus Borg, a member of the Jesus Seminar, an organization of religious scholars, many of them secular-minded and dedicated to discovering the real, human Jesus, to speak. Several of us from the UU church attended.

Also in Columbia, the Missouri United Methodist Church on Ninth Street has a woman senior minister, and the church opened its fellowship hall last winter to the homeless for an overnight place to sleep warmly and eat refreshing food.

These instances are but representative of the progressive stances taken by the mainline churches in the U.S. and in Columbia.

So I'm not ashamed of my Christian heritage. In fact, I'm proud of it, at least of the "other side," the side I come from.

And most of those folks still believe in God, or their idea of God. Some have become pretty secular. At First Christian in one of our stopovers, where Kathy was choir director, I discovered in a conversation with the associate minister that he didn't believe in God, that he just thought the Christian ministry was a good place to live a life of service. But most do believe in God.

I think some would be surprised at those here, in the Columbia UU, who believe in God, or their private conception of God.

What I'd like to suggest is that when UUs think of Christians, they think not of, or not only of, the Religious Right, but of the hundreds of thousands of mainline Christian ministers, and members, who have fought the good fight for social justice over the years, alongside many UU ministers and members, who have also fought the same good fight.