



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 11 July 2004
Title: **"Go and Do."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Deuteronomy 30:9-14
Second Reading Colossians 1:1-14
Gospel Luke 10:25-37

There is a common saying here in the Philippines, used both by expats and Pinoys, which says that in this country one hasn't broken a law until one gets caught. That's sometimes the way it seems with the irregular law enforcement that we often experience, but it at least shows that we are not legalistic here! Breaking the law depends on getting caught, and getting caught depends on actually *doing* something.

This is very unlike the classic interpretation of Judaism in Jesus' time where nit picking had become a fine art. I would venture to say that *most* Jews then, with the exception of the ultra-orthodox Pharisees, did not live their lives in constant fear of breaking the religious laws. Like most people, a majority had probably developed a comfortable accommodation with their religion that allowed them nominal membership but did not require them to be meticulous in observing it. If asked, however, the Jew of Jesus' time would probably have responded much like an Israeli Jew today, a Malaysian Moslem, or a Christian Filipino, American or Brit today: "Yes, I know what my religion teaches, but I haven't broken any rules...*until I get caught.*"

When Jesus tells his story about the Samaritan, it might seem as though he is taking a swipe at organized religion, and this is often the point preachers zoom in on. First

of all, it is a *practitioner of religious law* who asks the question about “Who is my neighbor?” He wants a legal definition: the letter of the law. In addition, it is two members of *religious administration* who walk right by the poor beaten man on the Jericho highway in the story. (It has even been suggested that the priest ignored the man because, since he was already robbed, *there wasn't anything left that he could get out of him!*) Yes, the clergy always run the risk of being used as a bad example because hypocrisy always lurks just around the corner for us, and we are easy targets.

But Jesus is also making a more general and more important point about *definitions* in this parable. The religious lawyer wants Jesus to define ‘neighbor’ as a *noun*, as a “thing”, as the static description of a person. Jesus responds by showing it as a *verb*, as an “act.” We are meant to look at the act of *being a neighbor*, not the legal definition of who a neighbor is. The Samaritan in the parable is a member of a different social and religious group not only from the poor victim of the mugging, but even from Jesus and his followers. He can't change that: it's how he was born and raised. But for Jesus, he is most importantly defined by what he does, not by his status or his race. This is the lesson Jesus wants his listeners to pick up, and it is expressed most succinctly in the question he asks the lawyer: “Which of these [] *proved neighbor* to the man?” The obviously correct response that the lawyer gives is: “The one who showed mercy.” It avoids all the legal niceties and fine points and small print. It also shows the centrality of behavior. Love is an *act*, not a passive state; something you *do*, not something you *have* or *are*.

Jesus' final words to the man are also meant for us. It is meant for us to remember when we are tempted to become legalistic and precise in demarcating our boundaries, our rights and our privileges. It is meant for us when we are tempted to treat our religion as honorary membership rather than active, dues-paying participation. He doesn't tell us to be content with any status quo. He tells us to prove it.

Our faith is not a passive thing: a status or a title. We know what the Lord Jesus taught and the example he gave to us. We even know what is expected of us since we hear it here every Sunday and have for most of our lives. The issue is what we *do*

about it. That's what Jesus said: "Go and *do!*" You see, in the Philippines- and in the rest of the world, too- you're not really either a neighbor or a Christian unless you *get caught being one.*