

Homily071110

ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE

(I was a young priest and the Lord taught me a lesson for life.)

When I was a ten year old lad my mom, along with six other moms in the parish, decided that they would cook a hot meal once a week and provide for a widow in the parish who had no children and was an amputee. So each Sunday dinner before we gathered at the dining room table to eat a tray would be gotten together and someone would drive and someone would hold the tray and we would deliver the food to the widow's home, pick up last week's dishes and come back. It was truly a corporal work. The widow loved us kids and she was a little to clingy and huggy for my taste as a ten year old but that was something we did every weekend until I went into the seminary six years later.

While in the Seminary my mom would fill me in on how the widow was doing and fill her in on how I was doing. That went on for ten years and she followed by career path closely. She even got fitted with a prosthesis and learned to walk so that she could attend my First Mass and reception. It was a great labor of love on her part. After I was ordained I immersed myself in parish work and when I would get a day off often I drove home just to crash, catch up on my sleep, have dinner with my mom and dad and then head back to the parish. In going home I would drive right by her house. My mother would invariably tell me that I should stop and visit with her on my way but I was always tired and although I said that I would, I never did. And then she died. I was saddened by her death and regretted not stopping.

That weekend's gospel was today's gospel and when I read the part about how the priest was passing by and the person on the side of the road was beaten up and he passed right on by, on the opposite side of the road. In an instant it was clear to me. I was that priest and I had been driving by that woman, beaten up by life, with no one to help her. I gave her a wide berth. I kept my distance too. I didn't want to get involved. I didn't want to help her. I was spending all my time helping other people, parishioners, but not going beyond the limits of those assigned to my care. When I was driving by her house I was tired. I was on my time. Her claims on me did not apply. I was "off duty." Bottom line. I didn't really feel like helping her. After her death and the powerful insight that followed I reevaluated my way of thinking. I made a resolution that I would pray for her for the rest of my life. I could not undo what I did not do for her in life but I could pray for her. And I could change the way I thought about my responsibilities. I was not only going to help those assigned to the boundaries of my parish. I would do what I could to help people. I know that I can't do everything but I also knew that life is messy and we can't always have things neat and tidy; it doesn't work like that.

The Samaritan takes the beaten man to the inn. He accepts the interruption. He allows the man's need to intrude on his own life. He gives some of his time. He gives

some of his energy. He gives some of his money to help this person he doesn't even know. Saint Augustine says that the inn in the story stands as a symbol for the Church. He brings the wounded person to the Church to be healed and cared for and assisted back to health. He brings the person to the church for compassion. I have an image of the church that I like to use on occasion, one which I have not heard used before. It is that the church is like a hospital.

In any given hospital there are sick people and hurting people even some wounded people. There are also very competent and very knowledgeable people who are dedicated to try to help these people return to a normal life. They are often compassionate and helpful people. There are also all manner of other people who are involved in lesser ways with this whole healing process. They serve in a variety of support roles. They administer the hospital and keep the records. They clean and they prepare the food. They volunteer and assist and escort people. There are others who assist in the transition out of the hospital. The intent is that things will progress smoothly but as we all know, hospitals are messy places, sometimes very messy places.

The church is such a place and each parish within the church is such a place as well. Each parish is a kind of hospital but in this hospital is the Wounded Healer, the Lord "by whose wounds we are healed." And at times we are the patients. Sometimes we should have gone to the doctor earlier but we didn't; we waited too long but now here we are. Sometimes we have been beaten up by life—emotionally, spiritually, even physically. Sometimes by our own folly or stupidity we have gone too often down the wrong path. We actually know better but we allow ourselves to be led down a path that is bad for us and now we find ourselves here. Parishes try to help people be healed, patched up, forgiven and then return to their daily life and routine. Parishes too are messy places.

But Christ is here. The Wounded Healer is here. The One who forgives us our sins and offers us the true healing that we need is here. He acts with compassion toward us even when we do not deserve it. But none of his acts of compassion are ever wasted. And so it is that not one of our own acts of compassion is ever wasted. When we come here he tends to us. He gives us some counsel. He bandages our wounds. Sometimes we too are anointed with oil. Sometimes we too have wine, his blood, poured out for us. And when we are renewed and refreshed we are sent out again to take our full place as part of kingdom life here on earth. We are sent out a little stronger. And then we too like the Samaritan say to the Inn keeper who is also the pastor, "Here is some money to help someone who is in need—of an education, or a blessing or a listening heart or some rent or food money, or just a helping hand." Jesus tends to us here—in and through his people—and then he asks us to extend what we have received with those we meet who are broken or beaten up by life. His way is put so succinctly: What you have received as a gift; give as a gift.