

## Good Samaritans

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego  
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Gracious God,  
Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.  
Amen.

I just finished reading Three Cups of Tea. This is the best-selling tale of a climber who loses his way after attempting K2, is saved by people in a village he stumbles into, and who then, in gratitude, spends himself building schools for under-served children in Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially girls. Good Samaritans abound in this true story. Greg Mortenson - the hero, a child of missionaries to Africa, and a nurse - is the first. He doesn't make it to the top of K2 because he and friend are diverted by the medical needs of another climber with pulmonary edema. Their successful rescue effort proves so exhausting that afterwards, in his continuing descent, Mortenson loses track of his friend and the trail they're following.

Near death himself, he hears the tinkling of bells and assumes it's a donkey caravan. He climbs up higher to get a better look and spies a man about a mile off. He begins screaming and the man finally hears him. It is their Muslim porter, Mouzafer, hired to help get their equipment down and who, once the dire nature of the situation made itself known, searched frantically for Greg. Good Samaritan #2. The porter praises Allah for saving Greg's life and immediately boils tea for him – green tea with salt, baking soda, goat's milk, and rancid yak butter; the nectar of the gods in that moment. Two more cups follow before Greg can continue on. He loses track of Mouzafer (who had gone on ahead to set up camp) and arrives at the village of Korphe, a place he's never heard of. He's taken in, dusted off, more tea is offered (Good Samaritans 3, 4, 5, etc.)

Exhausted, Greg falls asleep. Mouzafer is brought to him the next day – they will be partners in the work for years to come. Over the next several weeks Greg slowly recovers from his ordeal, explores the area, and learns of the people's need. The children have no school. They hold classes on a freezing, wind-swept hill. A vision emerges and a relationship begins. Now strong again and leaving for America, Greg promises to return to the village one day to build a school – he has no idea that he's just set the pattern for the rest of his life. A decade later and without any official aid from the U.S. government, with the help of hundreds of Good Samaritans here and abroad, dozens of schools are erected in Pakistan and Afghanistan. They offer a balanced curriculum far different from the madrassas, the religious institutions that breed Islamic fundamentalism. In our post-9/11 world, Greg's work stands as a beacon of hope and friendship, the best type of witness America can offer.

I mention Greg's story to you because it underscores two important themes in today's gospel. Compassion is the most obvious theme; when a human need is discerned, action is required. Greg takes a great risk to save another climber. Mouzafer is driven to find and save Greg when he gets into trouble. The villagers take on that work when the pair split up. Greg understands the saving importance of education and provides it

under the most trying circumstances. Many, many people sacrifice greatly to join him in that work.

So we get that from today's gospel – when a person is in need we're called to respond. We also get point number two – we are all called to respond. Compassion is not a Jewish virtue or a Christian virtue, it is a divine and universal command. Jesus frames the story today with that intent. He wants us to see that the one least expected to do the right thing ends up taking care of business. The Samaritan, alone in the story, has every excuse to walk by – he's out of relationship with the Jewish traveler and seen as unclean by the priest and the Levite. They're the ones who should be pitching in to save their own but, again, it's the Samaritan who takes action. The story is consciously set-up in this manner to jar us out of our narrow notions of righteousness. It calls us transcend division in the service of charity. In the end, perhaps, it calls us all to be humanists – Jewish humanists, Christian humanists, Islamic humanists, Buddhist and Hindu humanists – united in a common concern for any and all who suffer.

To this end, Saint Paul's Cathedral partners with Jewish Family Services to provide food for anyone who comes asking. Our end is lighter – we provide the space (the parking lot every Thursday afternoon) and they provide the provisions and staff. All who want to visit our children at Dorcas House in Tijuana are made welcome – believers of any faith, agnostics, or atheists. This is a foster-home for young people whose parents are incarcerated; the children need steady financial support and a lap to sit on, not an exacting theological dissertation. Seventeen people went down last month to do the sweet work of loving kids – no one checked for baptismal certificates before loading up and moving out. And today we celebrate the ministry of Saint Paul's Thrift Store. We'll continue to support the store as we transfer our ownership interest to the Alpha Project through the Uptown Interfaith Service Center. Now all of the proceeds from the store will go directly to an effective ministry to the homeless in San Diego. I don't need to make the point again but I will – this ministry serves and is supported by all people of all creeds or no creed (but all of them people of good faith).

So the universal call to faithful action marks our reflection this morning – offered to all by all. I should note in passing that this value is not held up by all NT authors. There is good work being done in biblical studies these days in regard to the question asked by the lawyer – “And who is my neighbor?” Some NT writers believe that one's neighbor is the person who simply happens to be near you. Others, especially John, the author of the fourth gospel, believe that the neighbor is the one who shares your spiritual values, who stands inside the circle of faith, who has given his life to Christ and may suffer for that; because that's true, his need for neighborly care is great. And others, especially Luke, seem to hold that every human being is a neighbor – hence the parable of the Good Samaritan.

You can sort yourself out in regard to the lawyer's question – “And who is my neighbor?” Is it the person nearest you? Is it the person inside the family of faith? How about any and all human beings? You can find biblical support for each of these positions. But no matter which NT author you align with, Jesus today encourages you to ask the next question – what are you called to do in relation to your neighbor? That next question reminds us that Christianity is, finally, a program of action. Faith without works is dead. And that, by the way, can also be said of all the world's great religions. To underscore that truth, I'll close quickly by quoting the Dalai Lama: “My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness.”