

TITLE: “Christ’s Church for the Wounded”

When I was growing up, out in the county on the east side of town, there was an inn up on a hill just down the road from our house. It was a really shady place hidden by pines, so that you couldn’t see who was there. There were rumors in the community about what went on there at night. It was the 1980s in the Bible belt, when divorce was rare and adultery was only something you heard about in sermons at church. Yet, there were stories about what went on at the inn on the hill. It seemed like an odd place for an inn. It was not located at a major cross-roads. You’d have to drive miles out of the way to get to it. No one in our small community seemed to know anyone who had ever stayed there. How did it stay in business? Rumors of love affairs and all varieties of crime and degeneracy abounded, though no one could prove it.

In our day, inns or hotels can be good or bad places. This was true in the ancient world too. Back then inns were rumored to be bad places. You could find inns all along the Roman roads, usually spaced out about a day’s journey apart from one another, so that travelers could always find lodging nearby. Plato complained that inns were prone to corrupt business practices. An inn-keeper might set up a place of lodging in the middle of nowhere, so that weary travelers would have no option but to stay there for the night, and then he would literally hold them hostage until they paid him a ransom to let them go. In Aesop’s Fables it’s the inn-keeper himself

who is held hostage by a thief, who wants to steal his fine coat. The early Jewish author Josephus says that in the 1st century A.D. the Jewish priests were not allowed to marry a woman who worked as an inn-keeper, likely because Jewish people were not supposed to intermingle with Gentiles, so to make a profit by welcoming all kinds of people under your roof without question was considered morally dubious.

It makes you wonder, if inns were rumored to be such questionable places, why did the Good Samaritan, in our Gospel lesson, take the injured Jewish man to an inn and leave him there? Before we can answer that question, we need to understand how the Good Samaritan is Jesus and we are the injured man in need of a savior. The Good Samaritan is Jesus. The parable of the Good Samaritan is itself an answer to a question, namely, the question, “who is my neighbor?” The parable is an answer to that question, but it’s also an answer to a problem, because the question was not asked honestly. St. Luke records, “And behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the Law? how readest thou? And he 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 neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?”

This was not an honest question. It was a question designed to make the one asking the question look good in the eyes of everyone else, sort of like how students behave when they have to do a group assignment. When the teacher puts students into a group there always seems to be one student who gets left out. He might want to do something to help the team, but the straight-A students don't trust him. He's a C-student, and they don't want to get a C, so they just do all of the work and exclude him. When the teacher reminds them that "this is a group assignment, and that means every student should be working on it together," the group leader responds, "that's exactly right, but who is *really* a part of our group? If he's not going to do what it takes to get an A, then he's really not part of the A-group is he?"

The lawyer wanted to justify himself, and so he asks "and who is my neighbor? Are the Gentiles my neighbor? What about the Samaritans? Surely God does not want me to love a Samaritan 'as I love myself' a child of Abraham! That wouldn't be fair would it?" We saw this same mindset come fully into view when Christ was brought to trial before Pontius Pilate. The Jewish leaders condemned him. They said, "Let his blood be upon us and upon our children!" They had completely lost sight of the love of God and the love of neighbor, because they wanted to justify themselves, to prove that they were the ones who had done all that Moses required them to do, and that Jesus was trying to change and even corrupt things. Jesus was saying that the law of Moses wouldn't be required anymore, but that would mean all

of their hard work and commandment-keeping would become meaningless, so that tax collectors and sinners, and even the Samaritans, would get just as much credit in God's eyes as they would. They delivered him to Pontius Pilate to be crucified, and the Scriptures said they did it because they envied him. They were envious because they did not want to share the promises of God with sinners.

The Scriptures say, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The fact that all people, both Jew and Gentile are sinners, was made very clear to Israel by the teaching of the prophets, and yet they persecuted the prophets. Christ too they ultimately persecuted. This makes Christ very much like the Samaritan, the C-student, the neighbor that no one wanted to claim was their neighbor. The Samaritans were related to Israelites. They were children of Abraham too, but they had intermarried with pagan peoples. St. Luke's genealogy of Christ shows that David too was of a mixed lineage. Rahab the pagan harlot and Ruth the Moabitess were his grandmothers. And yet, the Samaritans were hated for not being purebred. In the parable, when the innocent Jewish man was beaten by the robbers and left for dead, it was not the priest who stopped to help the fellow child of Abraham, his brother. It was not the Levite who showed compassion toward him. It was the Samaritan. The one person that the pious and religious person of that day would not expect.

Christ is the Good Samaritan. He is the Son of David of a mixed lineage, the Son of God, who left his Father's throne to be counted among sinners, born of a

woman, born under the law so that he might redeem those who were held in bondage by the condemnation of the law. He was the man of sorrows, rejected by his own people, not bearing any sin of his own, and yet “he who knew no sin was made Sin for us” that we might know the righteousness of God. The suffering servant, the persecuted prophet, the Son of God made son of Adam, and indeed the second and better Adam. He was bruised for our transgressions, and yet by his stripes we are healed, as the prophet Isaiah testifies. He has the power in himself to overcome sin in the flesh, to die to all sin, and to rise again to everlasting life, and he did all of it for us, because he himself never sinned.

Beloved, Christ has come to each of you as your Good Samaritan. If you know that you are a sinner, and that the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil threaten to undo any good that you have within you, then you know that you need a Savior who has already overcome the world. Your flesh is weak. Robbers have beaten and wounded you and left you spiritually dead. You may not feel dead. You might feel like things are pretty good for you right now. But “feeling good” is not a measure of righteousness before God. What is it that makes us righteous before God? The lawyer thought it was the love he had for other righteous people, but Christ showed him that that was insufficient. His self-righteousness, his desire to justify himself, would lead him to reject Christ, because those who do not know that they are ill, do not know that they need to be saved. So, if “things feel pretty good for you

right now” and you don’t really feel like you need a savior, the reality is, your feelings are blinding you to the truth, that you are lost, and perhaps that you’re experiencing are not real but a dream, a coma, and God is telling you to wake up.

Even before you’re fully awake, the Good Samaritan is already carrying you. Christ has looked upon you with the eyes of compassion and love. He approaches your cold and limp body lying on the roadside. He bandages you, pours oil and wine into your wounds, lifts you up and puts you on his beast, takes you to the inn, and cares for you. All of this he does, while you remain helpless, unable to do anything to save yourself. The One who was despised and rejected by the righteous, He takes you to the inn, which would have been the closest thing to a hospital back then, a place of shelter, but as we’ve heard, a place that could be good or bad. And then he leaves, promising to pay the inn-keeper whatever you owe, even above what he’s already paid. What does this mean for us?

As the church fathers tell us, the inn is a picture of the Church in the world. The people who lodge within it can be good or bad, but Christ puts us here, after he’s cleansed us in the font of baptism, and he promises to return soon. He entrusts us to the care of other sinners. Knowing that we will face trials and struggles here, he says to us, “in the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.” Though, even after we were washed we have sinned, thus

adding to the rumors about this inn, Christ has left us with the funds to purchase the holy oil of gladness, and the wine that he calls “the new covenant in my blood.”

Though we may find ourselves sharing the same lodging with other sinners, even proud people and hypocrites, and unfortunately sometimes, those who wish to exploit our weaknesses, Christ brings us here to the Church, to hear his word of promise, the promise that he is coming again, and that whatever debts we have incurred in this life, even what we have lost by robbery and extortion, from those who were supposed to care for us, Christ says he will pay for it all when he returns. He will make everything right again. “Jesus paid it all / all to him I owe / sin had left a crimson stain / he washed it white as snow.”

As we come to the altar to receive our Savior, the healing mercies of our Good Samaritan, let us not come as those who are righteous in our own eyes, but as weak and wounded sinners, who yearn for the medicine of immortality that Christ gives us in his mystical body and blood, that by pouring into us that holy oil and wine, he might come to dwell in us by his Holy Spirit, and we in him, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, forever and ever. Amen.