

I don't remember every watching it but years ago William Shatner hosted a television show called Rescue 911 which did reenactments of people being rescued from danger. Some folk who did watch it claimed that mostly it increased their own feelings of inadequacy. Viewing made you think that some guy hanging by his ankles off a 40-story building to rescue a stranded window washer was everyday stuff. One episode dealt with a three-year-old who saved his mother from a seizure. There was a dog that saved his entire family from a burning house. It was great to watch all those heroic efforts but it also left the average person wondering, probably doubting, whether they could ever do something like that.

I think the story of the Good Samaritan can prompt the same sort of feelings. Would I stop to help a stranger? Would I put myself at risk? Would I put that much effort into helping someone I didn't even know or maybe didn't even like? Who am I to imagine saving someone, I'm lucky once in a blue moon just to save somebody a parking space.

So if you are expecting me to tell you we must act like that Good Samaritan if we are to be followers of Jesus; that we must strive to be of service to others; that we must commit all our effort so that others will see us as the Good Samaritan – well, you would be wrong. Those are pretty standard conclusions to a homily on the gospel of the Good Samaritan.

There's nothing wrong with a little encouragement along the lines of doing good for others and we **do** need to be reminded of that sort of thing. But I'm not going to talk about that. I'm not going to talk about that because sometimes we also need to hear what the gospels say about God. The fact we overlook too many times is that the gospels are mostly good news about who God is, what he is like and what he is doing. It's nice if learning more about God gives us some hints about ourselves and living our lives, but that's not precisely the message that Jesus came to bring.

There are really just two main characters in the story of the Good Samaritan: the one who helps and the one helped. We usually are told to put ourselves in the place of the helper -- to picture ourselves in the role of the Good Samaritan. But in reality we fit more naturally in the role of the one helped. Consider this gospel story a teaching about the love of God. We are the person at the side of the road, utterly powerless, no reason to expect any help, no way to bargain or pay for it.

An important part of this message is that the love of God is so very different, so much more powerful than the various types of love we usually encounter. **The love for equals is a human thing**--of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

**The love for the less fortunate** is a beautiful thing--the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

**The love for the more fortunate** is a rare thing--to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of those who have nothing for those who have so much. The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy--love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. **This is God's love. It conquers the world.**

**GOD IS THE GOOD SAMARITAN**, healing us and saving us out of pure gracious generosity. We can not deal with God the way a lawyer might have dealt with the priest and Levite--reminding them of their obligation and the commandments. We can only deal with God the way the injured man dealt with the Samaritan, accepting with gratitude the surprising and unrequired attention that is given us. We do not earn, we do not win, we do not somehow manipulate anything from God. We can only accept the gift given.

The problem with looking at the story from this point of view is that it makes us feel so utterly helpless, so much at the mercy of God. There are, it seems, no guarantees and if we cannot do anything by ourselves to make **sure** that God loves us...

we feel so insecure. We are so used to human commitments being broken that we fear that God too might let us down.

A long time ago, in church councils far, far away, people who tried to find some way out of this situation were condemned, some had said **we could** do some things on our own that earned salvation -- they were rejected as unchristian heretics. Some other people, rather reasonably, said that we could feel secure that God wouldn't desert us because he is just -- if we keep our part of the bargain, then God will keep his part. This turned God into the character of the priest or Levite who is asked to live up to his obligations. This too was rejected by the church. Mankind does not bind God in any way; God never owes us anything.

Love is love, and the only way we can be sure that God will not eventually tire of us and withdraw his loving mercy is that he says he will not. And our experience tells us that he is a faithful God.

Sometimes, faced with all those laws and customs and advice about the best things to do and the right way to live as Christian, we forget that all of that is for our benefit, not God's. All that our church sets before us are possible ways to help us grow, **to help us accept what God has already offered** and freely given. Some people will never be comfortable being so dependent on God, but in the story of salvation we always remain the injured and helpless and God is the Good Samaritan already on his way to care for us.

The real challenge of **faith** is that we can't rely on anything we can accomplish; we have to be willing to be dependent on God's love for us. At the same time, that challenge is very good news. We **don't** have to accomplish our own salvation; we only have to welcome the love of God who is faithful and caring.