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**Sermon from the Community Thanksgiving Service held at St. Mary's Church
on November 24th.**

Gospel: The good Samaritan, Lk. 10: 25 – 37

Ministering to the Stranger

The parable of the Good Samaritan begins with questions: A question is asked, and it is answered with a question.

Questions are important to us. Every day we ask dozens of questions—of others, and of ourselves. We want to know, to learn, to better understand our world and one another; and so we ask questions.

One of the great theologians of the last century said that the human person **is** a question. He didn't mean simply that we are curious, wanting to learn. He meant that deep within our hearts and souls we find a mystery. It is a mystery connecting us to one another; a mystery that calls to us; that asks much of us, and promises much. We spend our lives responding to this mystery, as well as we can. We call this mystery God. God is far beyond our comprehension, beyond space and time. And yet we are sharing now in the life of God—as individuals and as community.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, the man asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor," We and others down through the centuries have asked the same question.

We know that we are called upon to help, to serve, to minister to others. We would do anything for those in our families, our children, our spouses; we would do our very best for our extended families, our friends, those in our church group or community. But what are the limits? Throughout history, peoples and religions seem to have been more active building walls to separate groups, than they have been active in building bridges.

With this in mind, Jesus' parable is surprising. The man in desperate need, is helped by the stranger, one from the other group. We are told that Jews and Samaritans did not socialize together, were not friendly, did not pray together. But this was the one who ministered with great care to the man who had been robbed and beaten.

And so, the neighbor turns out to be The Stranger, The Other—one who is ethnically or religiously different.

And in spite of the tendency to build walls, the literature and Sacred Writings of the world religions tell us that ministering to the stranger is important, and should be at the core of what we believe and practice.

Hinduism teaches that all life is sacred and that all religions contain paths to God. All peoples are part of one family. Just as no one of us can grasp the mystery of God, so neither can one culture or religion. We are, Hinduism teaches, part of one global family, and so there is no Stranger. We belong to one another; and so aggression and violence should not be part of our lives. We should minister to one another.

Buddhism goes beyond Hinduism in teaching that the distinction between groups, and even between ourselves as individuals—is an illusion. Just as a tree is nourished by the soil, sun, and rain, so we as individuals are intimately connected to our world and to one another. The leaves of the tree receive life and also give life. So it is with individuals and community. We are nourished by community, and we are responsible to build community.

Judaism finds care for the Stranger, the Other, imbedded in its sacred writings and traditions. Compassion is deeply rooted in the theme of reciprocity. The book of Leviticus says that “the stranger who resides with you shall be as one of your citizens, you shall love him (or her) as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt.” Most of us have experienced times in a foreign country, when we needed help, and it was there. Perhaps in a medical or financial emergency, or simply not knowing the way—and someone generously took care of us. When the Rabbi Hillel was asked to recite the entire Torah standing on one foot, he said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the whole of the Torah, the rest is commentary.”

For **Christians**, the parable of the Good Samaritan captures the full spirit of ministering to the stranger. It is echoed throughout the gospels and other New Testament writings. As God is love, so we are to love one another. In the last judgment scene of Matthew’s gospel we are exhorted to care for the sick, the hungry, the homeless, all of those in need. In doing these things, we are ministering to Christ himself.

Finally, **Islam** in the Koran teaches that believers should, “serve God ... and do good to ... neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet.” In other words, we should place no limits on our care and ministering.

As we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving, we should recall that the Pilgrims themselves were ministered to by the Stranger, the native Americans—who helped them get through that extraordinarily harsh first winter. And so the image of the Pilgrims and Indians eating together does celebrate a special moment in our history and our recognition of the importance in breaking down barriers.

And so it is that what unites us as religions is much greater than what separates us. We are called by the one God; the mystery deep within us.

In working with the men’s bible group, Dick Taber and I have been gratified to find that what we agree on, what unites us is far greater and more important than what may separate us. This should not be surprising—what C.S. Lewis wrote fifty or so years ago about the Christian tradition, we can expand to the world religions. It is at the core, the center, the foundation that the different religious traditions have the most in common. Differences are more at the periphery.

And so the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates several of these core qualities that religions share. What distinguishes the Samaritan from the priest and Levite in the story is his compassion, and also that he was aware, living in the present moment. Perhaps the priest and the Levite passed the man because they were preoccupied with that they had to do—at the temple, or their families waiting for them at home.

All of our religious traditions teach the importance of the present, the here and now. Regrets and guilt about the past are not productive; what is past is past. Anxiety about the future is not beneficial; the future is unknown—and may not even come. And yet our culture urges us to have goals, to plan, to measure our achievements, to constantly look toward the next event or accomplishment, to prepare for retirement. And so we can miss the present which is really our only opportunity to do good, to avoid evil. We would all have greater peace of mind if we really took not just one day at a time, but one minute at a time.

And as in the parable, it is in our actions that we show our faith.

In our own community, we are in fact doing a great deal for others, as individuals and as groups. And we are fortunate to have both the example and the opportunity to serve.

Owls Kitchen is housed here at St. Mary's but supported by the entire community, and serves hundreds of people each month.

The crop walk, a world-wide event, reminds us of our connection and responsibility to the hungry.

Simply Smiles supported by the Congregational Churches and others sends resources and people to build homes for those in need. Maria Reyes who died tragically in the fire about a month ago, was part of the Simply Smiles group that went to Mexico last year. And when they assembled for the return trip; she came with none of the things she had taken. She had given away everything

Habitat with volunteer workers builds homes in our own towns. The Rotary, Knights of Columbus, Chores Services, and volunteers provide support to individuals in need. A few years ago our family received extraordinary help from the visiting nurses.

There are many calls on our generosity and on our compassion in this world of constant communication. And God within us is urging us not to pass by the one in need—even though he or she might be a Stranger.

Let us Pray. God Our Father we know that you are deep within us—as individuals and as community. We live only because of your creative power and your love. We pray that you send your Holy Spirit into our minds and hearts that we might better minister to those around us, those in need, the stranger near us and the stranger far away. Help us not to be strangers to one another. Amen.