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First Parish Church

In today's gospel reading we heard the well-known story of the good Samaritan. The theme for the day in many liturgical guides and even on the bulletin cover is "compassionate neighbors."

**What is a compassionate neighbor?**

-from the *Congressional Record* of October 14, 1968 page 31,636:

***"When Hitler attacked the Jews I was not a Jew, therefore I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the Catholics, I was not a Catholic, and therefore, I was not concerned. And when Hitler attacked the unions and industrialists, I was not a member of the unions and I was not concerned. Then, Hitler attacked me and the Protestant church -- and there was nobody left to be concerned. "***

So that certainly puts what may be expected of a "compassionate neighbor" into a very real and very frightening context.

And, it is a context that we truly need to consider. Whether we are talking about Samaritans or Nazis-we are talking about politically and emotionally charged situations which can bring out the very best and the very worst of our humanity. And sometimes even when we convince ourselves that we can justify standing still or looking the other way; we are called to step forward in love.

In the retelling of the good Samaritan-and the fact that we are all familiar with the story-we lose something of the story's political and social context.

We lose sight of who the Samaritan was. We lose sight of the fact that he was not simply someone who took time out of his day to be a good neighbor- to drive someone to the airport or to send a casserole when someone was sick.

The Samaritan stopped to save his enemy. He spent his time, his money and risked his life to save his enemy. And sometimes we lose that in the retelling.

In the context of our present day legal system world wide there are now "good Samaritan laws". And although these laws share many similarities; what fascinates me is that there is one major difference-and that is the reason that they exist at all.

Good Samaritan Laws seem to exist for 2 distinct reasons.

In some countries and in most jurisdictions in our own nation- the underlying reason for the good Samaritan law is to protect those people who want to step forward in a crisis. The people who it is assumed, would come forward if only they could be assured that if they make a good faith mistake, or if in spite of their best efforts they are not able to save someone whose life is in danger-they at least will not be sued as repayment for their efforts.

In many countries, the intent of a good Samaritan law is not to encourage someone to step forward but to compel them to. These laws focus not on protecting a good Samaritan who steps forward –but ensuring that there are consequences for those who don't step forward.

There are of course, many exceptions and endless clauses to all of these laws about who is and isn't expected to put themselves in harms way and terms like "reasonable action" are open to a wide range of interpretation.

Whether we should be encouraged or expected to do the proverbial "right thing" simply begs the question: What is the right thing?

**What is a compassionate neighbor?**

**How can I be compassionate neighbor?**

***A mother once approached the Emperor: Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The son was a soldier in Napoleon's army. Twice, while the young soldier had been assigned to guard duty he had fallen asleep in the guard tower. The emperor explained to the distraught mother that the young man had committed a heinous offense not once-but twice and justice demanded death.***

***"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy."***

***"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.***

***"Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for."***

***"Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.***

***[Luis Palau, Experiencing God's Forgiveness, Multnomah Press, 1984.](#)***

Heavenly justice belongs to the realm of God; but the mercy of God is ours now. I pray for the strength to ask for mercy, and the grace to follow the example of Jesus our Christ.

Lord have mercy. Help us to be compassionate neighbors.