

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on July 11, 2010 (Proper 10, Year C)

Blindness. It's a spiritual condition that transcends eyesight. We see two extreme cases of it this morning in the well-known story of the Good Samaritan.

Perhaps it could be called selective blindness. Surely the priest and the Levite would have helped a *friend* in distress. Or someone they knew – they would probably have even called it their moral or civic duty to help. These were good, upstanding citizens after all. People like you and me – heck, one of them is even a “priest” which always give *me* pause. But their selective blindness causes them to cross to the other side of the road; to turn a blind eye to the suffering in their midst; to ignore the desperate need that is quite literally right under their noses.

And their inaction is awfully easy to condemn. ‘If *I* had been on the scene, I would certainly have helped the man in need,’ we can't help but think. ‘If *I* had been on that road to Jericho, the walls would have come tumbling down before *I* would have walked past that beaten and bloodied man.’ But is that really true? I'd like to think so but the reality is that we don't know how we would have acted in a similar situation. It's surely a lot easier *not* to get involved; to pretend we haven't seen anything and just keep moving.

Living in a nice community on the South Shore makes selective blindness an even greater temptation. You can spend a lifetime avoiding poverty and violence. We all know the neighborhoods to avoid, we all know where to go to stay in the company of people that look like us and act like us. If you hug the coastline you're generally okay. There may be a few pockets to avoid in Quincy or Hull or Weymouth or even in south Hingham. But if you stick close to the Fruit Center or Jerusalem Road in Cohasset, you'll generally be okay.

The problem is that the man who is beaten and left on the side of the road, keeps rearing his bloodied head in our own lives. Not literally, of course, but in ways that challenge our selective blindness. Sometimes we pay attention; but often we act like the priest and the Levite by quickly and quietly passing right on by.

One such iteration of this man comes in the form of an easel that's set up in the narthex (that's churchese for entryway). It's been there for the past month, silently announcing our continuing partnership with St. Stephen's in Boston. It's nothing much to behold – no glitzy photos or fancy lettering. Just several sign-up sheets on poster board offering the opportunity to participate for a day or two in a summer program to help some inner city kids. The easel complements the announcements that have been running in the bulletin and in the weekly e-news. But it's easy to ignore. It's easy to cross over to the other side of the narthex and walk past. It's easy to pretend that you don't see it. It's summer after all and everybody needs a break.

But it's there. Standing as a silent witness to our selective blindness. Asking for just a few hours of our time that will potentially have a major impact on the lives of some kids who are used to being ignored and stepped over and stepped upon. Asking us to spend some time at Weir River Farm with a group of kids or to prepare and serve some meals for their summer program in Boston.

This isn't about guilt; it's about embracing the fullness of Jesus' call. It's about faith and action. In response to the lawyer's question about what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus answers with what's become known as the Summary of the Law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." It's the Christian life in a nutshell – love God, love neighbor. But the lawyer seeks appropriate clarification, asking "And who is my neighbor?" It is in response to this question that Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The definition of a neighbor is broadened to include not just those in your neighborhood, not just those with whom you are familiar, but all of humanity. People known and unknown; people like us and different; people of high degree and low. And that is a spiritual challenge for all of us because we much prefer the safety of the familiar; we prefer to avoid conflict rather than to engage it. And by expanding the definition of "neighbor" Jesus draws us well out of our respective comfort zones.

Jesus explains that living in right relationship with God isn't just about religious observance; it's about putting faith into action. As God loves us we must share that love with others – only then are we fully living a faithful life.

I once saw a sign over the door of a church – you saw it as you walked out – that said, "As the worship ends, the service begins." To me this is a wonderful reminder that our faith isn't just about spending an hour here on Sunday mornings. As Christians we are charged with taking our faith out into the world; everything that happens at the altar necessarily flows right back out the front doors of the church and into the community. That's the point of giving the dismissal at the end of each service. It's not an expression of passive ending but of active beginning. "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

Go. Love. Serve. That's what Jesus is getting at in this conversation with the lawyer. It is a call to faith and action. At the end of the parable Jesus asks an obvious question – "Which one of these three was a neighbor?" The lawyer rightly answers, "The one who showed mercy." And Jesus doesn't just say "You're correct" or "Good answer." He says "Go and do likewise." And that, my friends, is how we inherit eternal life. "As the worship ends, the service begins."