Dearly beloved: Christ is among us!

If we've ever read a book or seen a movie, we probably remember those where the unexpected happens. We're going along, reading or watching and then are caught off guard when what we think will happen doesn't and what we didn't expect to happen does. This is what Jesus does in His telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells this story because He is being put to the test by a lawyer. The lawyer confesses that we must love God and neighbor. But he wanted to justify himself, to show that he was right in his choices. So he asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus teaches the lawyer and us about who our neighbor is. The man going from Jerusalem to Jericho is presumably a Jew. He is robbed, clothes stolen, brutally beaten and left for dead by the robbers. The man is utterly helpless, no way of saving himself. Jesus tells us along comes a priest. Would his co-religionist help him? One would expect that. But no, the priest not only passes him by but crosses to the other side of the road to avoid the man. Then comes a Levite, a member of the priestly class. Would this one man help his fellow countryman, one also a member of the Chosen People as he himself? One would expect that. But again, no. The Levite, like the priest, came, took a look, and went away on the other side of the road to avoid the man. Finally comes a Samaritan, someone from a group that had been part of Israel but broke away during the Babylonian captivity and altered their worship, mixing in pagan elements. Samaritans had nothing to do with Jews and vice versa. They were opposed to each other, each thinking they were right. The surprise is that this Samaritan, an opponent of the man laying there half-dead, he is the one who shows compassion to him, who acts as a human person towards him. Binding his wounds, placing him on his animal, leaving money for his care at the inn.

The lawyer must have been shocked at the outcome of the story. He must have thought his neighbor was the person who was like him, a fellow observant Jew, the person who lives next door, whom he'd prayed with in synagogue or at Temple. But it was the outsider, the heretic, the Samaritan who was neighbor to the dying man. The lawyer couldn't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan" when answering Jesus' question who was his neighbor. He said, "the one who showed mercy on him." Jesus closes their dialogue with the words, "go and do the same." Go and see as your neighbor even the person outside of your circle, your religion, your life. This is the lesson Jesus teaches to us. To show mercy, compassion, tenderness of heart to others. Not to impute evil intentions to others but to show mercy because God has created each one of us in his image.

This parable has an even deeper meaning than the obvious point Jesus makes to the man. It is also a story about humanity that by sin made itself an enemy to God. Cutting itself off from God by trying to be gods in its own right without the Lord and Creator of all. A humanity ravaged by its own sins, helpless to save itself. God took upon Himself our broken humanity, humbled Himself in ways we cannot comprehend, by becoming one of His own creatures. To take us up upon His shoulders, He Himself becoming the beast of burden that shouldered the broken body of the dying humanity in the Gospel. Offering Himself up in love for us so that the way to Him might be opened for us. For "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. For…while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son." (Romans 5:8,10-11)

By treating everyone as our neighbor, we imitate our Lord Jesus Christ, showing the love that God has for each and every person born into the world, Christian and non-Christian alike. "For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe." (1 Timothy 4:10)