

Seventh Sunday after Trinity
July 14, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 10:25-37

Yesterday I had to explain to my children the difference between being wrong and being bad. We were talking about a group of people we had known years ago when one of my children identified them as “bad.” I said that I knew them very well, and they were not bad at all. The retort came, “But they aren’t Catholic.” So I told my children, “People who aren’t Catholic can indeed be good,” and I told them this story.

During World War II a man from Turkey, a Muslim, saved as many as 20,000 Jews from death in German concentration camps. His name was Behic Erkin, and he served as Turkey’s ambassador to France from 1939 until 1943. The way he did it was as simple as it was ingenious. Using his nation’s status as a neutral party in the conflict, Ambassador Erkin gave his nation’s protection to any Jew who could demonstrate a tie to Turkey, however slight. He claimed those people as Turkish nationals and organized trains emblazoned with the star and crescent that took them out of Nazi-occupied France to safety in Turkey.

The Germans figured out what he was up to and decided to deport to the concentration camps a trainload of people that Ambassador Erkin had claimed were Turkish citizens. When he found out, Erkin went personally to the German governor’s office and demanded their release. When he was rebuffed, Erkin then threatened to bring Turkey into the war against Germany. The German governor was unmoved, so Ambassador Erkin took from his pocket and placed on the table his Iron Cross First Class, which he had been awarded by the Kaiser when Germany and the Ottoman Empire were allied during World War I. He told the Germans, “You owe me,” and that trainload of Jews was taken to Turkey instead of Auschwitz. Shortly thereafter Ambassador Erkin was recalled by the Turkish government to Constantinople, having rescued practically all Turkish Jews living in France.

When I was finished telling the story, my children had one more objection. They said, “I thought the Muslims didn’t like the Jews.”

So this morning, on the heels of the conversation we had last night, we hear the parable of the Good Samaritan. The objection to Jesus’ story would have been the same as my children’s was to mine: “But I thought the Samaritans didn’t like the Jews.” And herein is the point: even people that are wrong can do good.

The Samaritans were wrong, after all. After the fall of the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century B.C., the Assyrians undertook a population transfer to dilute Jewish nationalism in their newly-acquired territory. The Assyrians and Jews intermarried, and over the generations a hybrid Assyrian and Jewish religion developed—half pagan, half true. Samaritans denied the importance of the Temple in Jerusalem, yet continued to offer ritual sacrifices. The result was that Jews and Samaritans became enemies.

Now the priest and the Levite, they were right. All priests were taken from the tribe of Levi, and they were charged with offering the daily ritual sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. They had preserved the faith, unadulterated even under centuries of foreign occupation. Unlike the Samaritans, who had gone the way of the world and now taught heresy and apostasy, the Levite and the priest were pure, calling their people to the strict observance of the Law, no matter how many Babylonian, Greek, or Roman soldiers happened to occupy Jerusalem.

But what we see from the parable is that the Samaritan, who was wrong, did what was right. And the Levite and the priest, who were right, did what was wrong. The man who worshiped on the wrong mountain undertook good works. And the men who led the correct worship of the one true God neglected to love their neighbor as they loved themselves.

What I told my children was, “Yes, it is often true that Muslims do not like Jews, but in this instance the Muslim, Behic Erkin, knew better than a good number of his Catholic neighbors in France. He knew that it was not right to kill the innocent, and so he did all that he could to save the lives of those who were beaten and bloody, left for dead on the side of the road, even as people who should have known better sat on their hands and watched the innocent die. Behic Erkin, as a Muslim, was wrong, but he did what was right. He was not Catholic, but he was able to do good.”

In talking about the Holocaust, I could have used as examples of righteousness the thousands of Catholics throughout Europe who risked their lives to save Jews from the gas chambers, and there were literally thousands, many of whom did pay with their lives. But if I talked about the Catholics instead of the Muslim who saved Jews, I could reinforce the error in the thinking of a child that all we have to do to be secure before God is to be right: Catholics are good because they are right, and others are bad because they are wrong. The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that we must not be content with being right. We must also do right. To love God and our neighbor means that we must actually do good to our neighbor for God.

I have to commend you in this regard. For nearly nine years now you have worked hard and given lots of money and time to reconcile people to Holy Mother Church. You have not faltered in the requirement that we do good to our neighbor so that he may know the love of God. Not only have you funded our many mission trips to locales across the country, not a few of you have gone on them. You’ve spread the word about our parish and our mission, and our membership swelled enough that we could buy this church and provide a home for my family and me, and every future pastor who will live here.

That purchase, and our permanent establishment as a parish, coincided with the Ordinariate taking responsibility for much of what we had done since our inception. In this we rejoice, but it means we’ll have to discern a new mission. Since what we were doing is now being done by someone else, we have to find the vulnerable, bleeding souls on the side of the road that no one else is tending to. We have to love our neighbor now as the Good Samaritan loved his.

We can never become complacent and believe that being right is good enough, that having found the truth we must do no more. The best way to demonstrate we are right is by doing good works that give glory to our heavenly Father. Thank you for the ideas that you have offered thus far, and I want you to offer more. In time, how we as a parish are to love our neighbor will be revealed to us. In the meantime, give thanks that God has given the opportunity to do so, that He called us to be right so it would be that much easier for us to do good.