

**Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – July 14, 2019**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor**

While on vacation, I had the opportunity to take in a baseball game between the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim – say that three times fast – and the Oakland Athletics. I found myself sitting with among some Angels fans who were natives of Southern California who came to this stadium often. Also in the area were some visitors from other cities – people who, like me, found themselves with a free evening close to a ballpark they had never visited. Sitting next to me was a young father who was taking his son to his first major league baseball game. He wanted his son to enjoy the experience, but – since they were visiting – he also wanted to get back to their hotel reasonably early as they were going to Disneyland the next day. Yes, in those few rows, we were old and young. We came from different backgrounds and experiences. There I was in Anaheim, California, speaking with people that I had never met and would likely never see again, but we felt like neighbors because of our love for baseball and the excitement of being in a major league ballpark.

We think of neighbors in these terms, do we not? People – even those we may have never met – with whom we have something in common. Traditionally, that has been the people who live close to us – those with whom on a daily basis we share the same weather, the same city services, the same language and culture. But we understand that the concept of “neighbor” means more than the folks who live in midtown. Indeed, as diverse as midtown is, as we find that the people who live next door to us – or come to Mass with us – may or may not speak the same language, then our concept of a “neighbor” is challenged. These days, we often find that we have much more in common with the people who live many miles away than with those who live on our street. Neighbor doesn’t mean what is used to.

In our very familiar gospel passage today, Jesus does more than challenge our concept of neighbor – he blows it out of the water. In the parable of the man beset by robbers, Jesus illustrates that even one we think of as our enemy can be our neighbor. Recall that Jesus lived some one thousand years after the reign of King David. The people of Israel, united under David and Solomon, had later been divided into two kingdoms – north and south. The northern kingdom – which the Scriptures first refer to as Israel, but which history records as Samaria – this northern kingdom fell to an Assyrian invasion in the year 721 B.C. For 700 years, therefore, Jews and Samaritans, peoples with a common history and a common relationship with the Lord God, had been separated. Without modern means of communication, without any attempt on the part of one side or the other to stay in touch, their experiences led them in different directions – so much so that when they did encounter one another it was as enemies, not as long-lost cousins. Their common ground had been buried under so much history,

under so much bad blood, that they could not find any point of reference. Yes, their countries bordered one another, but they were anything but neighbors.

That's why the parable that seems so benign to us seemed so startling to the people of Jesus' time. Given their distance, given their history, how could anyone think of a Samaritan as a neighbor, of a Samaritan as "good." By contrast, in the minds of Jesus' contemporaries, you didn't get any better than a priest or a Levite. With them we have common ground. These good people are most assuredly our neighbors. Yet both of them passed by – not out of a lack of compassion as we often imagine, but out of a misguided sense of duty to God. Touching someone who is bleeding, you see, would have made them ritually impure. They could not serve God if they had stopped to help this poor, beaten man. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells **us** that we cannot not serve God if we do **not** stop to help. The measure of being a neighbor, Jesus tells us, is not proximity, or a common language, or a common history. The measure of being a neighbor is treating one another with mercy.

By that standard, are we good neighbors? Do we see people of other races and nationalities and languages in the store or on the street and think well of them? Or do we feel ourselves superior and wonder why these people are here and how they are paying for their food and whether they are documented? Being a neighbor, being a disciple, means seeing Christ, seeing God our creator, in each and every human person. It means looking beyond our differences and seeing the common ground of humanity in everyone. Our experience tells us that that is not as easy as it sounds. We need only watch the news or open the paper to hear about political differences and racial tension and sectarian violence. Yes, there are such conflicts in many parts of the world, but we find these same conflicts in our own backyard, maybe even in our own home. Our political climate – indeed, even our religious climate – has become so toxic that people can no longer civilly discuss their differences. These days, we often try to shout down or ostracize the other person rather than trying to calmly discuss our respective points of view. We will not be able to cure all of society by ourselves, but we can take small steps to make a difference. We can reach out to one person – as the Good Samaritan did – and show that person the face of Christ. We can be instruments of change in our parish, in our city, in the voting booth. We are challenged to find common ground with every person because compassion and mercy must be at the heart of our identity. Our neighbor is everyone who bears the image and likeness of God.