

Fifteenth Sunday 2013 C
Keeping it Simple
Father Frank Matera

There are times we make things more complicated than they are. For example, in today's Gospel a scholar of the Law asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In response, Jesus asks the scholar what is written in the Law of Moses. And the scholar correctly answers that we should love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as our self.

But this simple answer is not enough for the scholar who has spent his whole life studying the intricacies of the law. It is too simple, too self-evident. It is not complicated enough. And so he raises a second: But who is my neighbor? Is the foreigner my neighbor? Is the stranger my neighbor? Or, is my neighbor only those who are near and dear to me?"

Jesus responds by telling the scholar the parable of the Good Samaritan, after which he asks a second question: "Which of these three—the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan—*was a neighbor* to the man in need"? Once more, the scholar answers correctly: "The one who treated him with mercy."

Notice how the scholar of the Law complicates matters by trying to define his neighbor with legal precision. The scholar wants an answer that will tell him who he is and who is not obliged to help. But Jesus simplifies everything. Instead of defining who the neighbor is, Jesus challenges the scholars *to be a neighbor* to anyone in need. He says that it is more important to be a neighbor to those in need than to define who our neighbor is. Whereas Jesus sees what is important, the scholar does not. Whereas the scholar complicates matters, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter.

Our faith is simple: God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son into the world, not to condemn the world but to save it. Our faith proclaims that God has already offered us the gift of salvation. All we need do is reach out and take hold of it. Our faith proclaims that it is more important to be a neighbor to those in need than to define who our neighbor is.

There are times, however, when like the scholar of today's gospel we complicate our faith. Rather than view our faith as a gracious offer of salvation from a loving God, we treat it as a complex system of dos and don'ts. Rather than accept the gift of salvation, we worry about what we can and cannot do.

But Moses reminds us in today's first reading that God's commandment is not so mysterious and remote that we cannot find it. It is near us; it is already on our lips and in our heart and all we need do is obey it. This is how Jesus lived; this is how he teaches us to live. The path to eternal life is close at hand: Love God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, with all your mind, and you will live. Love your neighbor as yourself, and will be saved. If we do this we will inherit eternal life. If we are a neighbor to those in need we will be saved. If we are merciful as God is merciful, God will be merciful to us.

In a few moments, we will receive the Eucharist in which we will be united with the risen Christ and each other. As we share in this Holy Communion that makes us one with Christ, we ask for the grace to love God and each other. We ask for the grace to be a neighbor to those in need.