

Moved with pity

Proper 10, Year C - July 14, 2019

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." - Luke 10:25-37

Vincent van Gogh was sick and in crisis when he painted the image of the Good Samaritan found on this morning's bulletin cover. It had been about 18 months since Van Gogh had cut off much of his own left ear with a razor, on Christmas Eve 1888. The townspeople of Arles has taken to calling him 'The Red-Headed Madman.'

In early May, 1890, as his mental illness caused him and others more and more anguish, Van Gogh left Arles and checked himself into a sanitarium in nearby Saint-Rémy. Someone there arranged for him to occupy two small rooms, one a bedroom, the other a studio. During his time there, he painted both outdoors and indoors, and his indoor paintings included a number of renderings of the works of other artists. The Good Samaritan is, in fact, his interpretation of an 1849 painting by Eugène Delacroix. Van Gogh interpreted only one other Delacroix painting during this time, a Pietà—the Blessed Mother of Jesus holding in her arms the body of her crucified Son. Van Gogh was clearly sensitive during this time to examples of human compassion.

Delacroix's prior Good Samaritan painting is unmistakably clear in Van Gogh's rendering of it. But a more vibrant palette and the heavy brushstrokes are unmistakably Van Gogh. He took advantage of his brighter field of light to emphasize features of the Good Samaritan story that are only incidental and easy to overlook in the Delacroix.

In the foreground to the left, for instance, you can see a large wicker or leather trunk. The same trunk is only a dark shadow and has no discernible lid in the Delacroix. Here, however, the empty trunk stands out as the most prominent feature in the painting apart from the center tableau. As a prop, the trunk efficiently makes reference to the man who was "going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead."

That empty trunk may also have represented what he felt was his own shattered and empty life. We know him now as the world renowned creator of 'Starry Night' or the portrait of Armand Roulin — a personal favorite. But let's remember that in his ten years as a painter Van Gogh sold only one canvas. Previous to his career as artist he arguably failed in successive endeavors as art dealer, a teacher, a theology student and a pastor. His romantic



interests were all peculiar, and all seemed doomed from the start. At times he must have felt as if life and circumstances and fellow humans had left *him* stripped, beaten and left for dead at the side of the road.

Some of us may recall a time when we were in that ditch, feeling beat up and left for dead, wondering who may come along next.

And that brings us to the Pharisee and the Levite who come upon the injured man but do nothing. They are obscure in the painting of Delacroix but clear as day in Van Gogh's reinterpretation. They are not looking back. They have kept themselves ritually pure and are now continuing safely on their way. As we view these characters, our own consciences may be pricked. We recall all the times we've passed by and our rationalizations for doing so:

"I need to be somewhere else."

"It's too awkward."

"I don't feel safe."

"I've already helped out three other people today."

"This is beyond my expertise."

"I don't deal with *those people*."

And so,

"I'll just be on my way."

Energetically filling the center of the canvases in the Good Samaritan paintings by both Delacroix and Van Gogh is the Good Samaritan himself. He is captured in the moment that Jesus describes when he put the injured traveler 'on his own animal.'

Prior to this moment in the story, so poignantly conveyed by both artists, Jesus explains that the Samaritan has been "moved with pity." The original Greek word from which this phrase is derived is a real tongue twister: *es-plank-NIZ-o-mai*

(**Σπλαγχνίζομαι**). The root of the word refers to the heart and the entrails, including those of animals that were used in the Temple sacrifices – the holiest parts of the offering. When turned into a verb it connotes being deeply moved. In the New Testament, this term is only found in the Synoptic Gospels, and it is characteristically used by Jesus to show the compassionate nature of God toward broken human beings.

This language is introduced in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, by way of the Song of Zechariah: "In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us." (1:78) And we all know that while the Prodigal Son "was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20) And now a religiously suspect Samaritan, one who could never hope to fulfill the prevailing Jewish standard of purity, was *moved with pity* when he came upon the ambushed and injured traveler. In Here, Jesus is apparently elevating the Samaritan's compassion to the level of a holy and pure offering, and let's not lose sight of the fact that he does so in response to a lawyer's question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Notice in the painting if you will what being *moved with pity* looks like. Here it is clearly not merely a feeling, a point of view or an intellectual conclusion. Being moved with pity struggles alone under a heavy and awkward load. Being moved with pity knows that the violent robbers may still be nearby but takes action anyway. Being moved with pity does not know in advance how much it will cost but commits anyway.

In the course of researching Van Gogh's Good Samaritan, I came across an essay about a another Good Samaritan painting, this one by a living, mentally ill Dutch artist named Marian Kamp. The painting had been



featured in an exhibit that was a collaboration between a museum in Amsterdam that features religious art and a mental health center there that includes art therapy in its programs.

Marian Kamp's painting was an intentional reinterpretation of Van Gogh's Good Samaritan. The essayist drew a beautiful and thoughtful line from Delacroix to Van Gogh to Marian Kamp. ¹ And as I followed that line I saw how the essayist was partly describing how the gospel of Jesus is transmitted from generation to generation, person to person. We form impressions and see how others have rendered the stories of our salvation, and to keep our faith living and supple and relevant, we begin our own canvases, and on them we render our own cultures and categories and resources and challenges.

How is your Good Samaritan painting coming along?

Whose faithful example are you studying as you develop your own canvas?

How are you showing the dilemmas and divisions and fears and unique opportunities of our own times?

Where are you in the picture?

Is your rendering timid or bold?

Are you restrained by decorum or are you courageously wading into ambiguity, uncertainty and awkwardness?

Are you held back by appearances and by the standard understanding of the rules?

Or are you moved with pity?

Amen.

¹ [Essay by John Kohan, from the website *Sacred art meditations: Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart*](#)