

Retelling “The Good Samaritan”

Jesus’ Parable is the Founding Story of Catholic Health Care

[From] century to century . . . the Church has re-enacted the Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan, revealing and communicating her healing love and the consolation of Jesus Christ.

—Pope John Paul II¹

Stories tell people who they are, where they come from, what is good and bad, and how they are to organize themselves and maintain their sense of unique identity in a challenging world. They do this in a way that evokes strong feelings. Stories that recount the founding of a nation, for example, are the emotional glue that can bind people together at the deepest level of their collective being. But stories have this impact only when they are skilfully retold, especially in times of uncertainty and tumultuous change.

Since health care in the Western world faces an increasingly turbulent environment, and since faith-based health care is additionally confronted with the challenges of secularism, those of us who serve faith-based care have an urgent need to identify and retell the *primary* founding story of our missions and ministries. Vision, mission statements, and theological analyses of our health care ministries are important, but they can never have the power to stir people’s enthusiasm in the way that biblical stories do. This is why Jesus so frequently used parables as a teaching method.* We must do the same,

*One-third of the recorded sayings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels are embedded in parables.

especially since the desire for storytelling is a positive quality of our postmodern age.²

THE GOOD SAMARITAN STORY

In the opinion of the late Pope John Paul II, the parable that best articulated the heart of the health care mission and ministry of Jesus Christ was that of the Good Samaritan, told in Luke 10:29-37. “Those involved professionally or voluntarily in the world of health” are invited “to fix their gaze on the divine Samaritan, so that their service can become a prefiguration of definitive salvation and a proclamation of new heavens and a new earth ‘in which righteousness dwells,’” writes the pope, quoting Peter (2 Pt 3:13).³

In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI points four times to the significance of the parable of the Good Samaritan as the model for holistic care. The parable, he writes, “remains as a standard which imposes universal love towards the needy . . . whoever they may be.”⁴ This masterpiece of literature, he says, sets out “the program of Jesus” for social and personal healing that he himself adopted and implemented.⁵ And Jesus, the pope says, calls all his followers to do the same.

Down through the centuries, individual Christians—the founders of religious congregations, for example—have built their particular stories of healing on this fundamental program. These stories are still important and need to be retold. But as health care navigates an age of increasing mergers and new sponsorship models, it becomes especially urgent to return to the story that is the *common basis* of all religious health care. Eventually, we can expect new individual stories to come out of this common basis, stories that relate our facilities to the new administrative structures.

To fully grasp the parable’s relevance and power, however, we must first appreciate the general cultural environment at the time in which



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the parable was told and, in particular, the meaning of “sickness” as the word was used by the ancient Hebrews. Only then can we begin to grasp the extraordinary richness of the parable.

DISEASE AND ILLNESS

In Hebraic culture, people identified two types of sickness: *disease* and *illness*.⁶ Today’s medical anthropologists make the same distinction.⁷ Disease—cancer, leprosy, a severe injury—is visible. Illness, however, cannot be seen. It is the inner pain of the heart that *accompanies* significant disease, such as fear of the future or grief that comes from the loss of good health. It is summed up in questions such as “If I survive the cancer, will I have a job?” “If I die, who will look after my family?”

In the culture of the ancient Hebrews, certain diseases automatically marginalized the sufferers, cutting them off from all human contact. They became socially nonpersons and were considered worthless, even dangerous to society. The chief Hebraic concern about leprosy, for example, was not that it was primarily contagious but that it was ritually polluting. In Psalm 88, “A Despairing Lament,” for example, the sufferer beseeches God: “I cry out to you in the night” (verse 1). He has a disease that has pushed him to the margins of society, and the anguish in his heart is overwhelming. He is, he says, being consigned to “the brink of Sheol” (verse 4) and being “left among the dead” (verse 6). The reader can still feel the sufferer’s inner pain. “You have deprived me of my friends . . .” he says. “You have made me repulsive to them” (verse 9). The sufferer is not asking for physical healing of his disease, but, rather, for Yahweh to hear and feel with him his feeling of abandonment, which is his illness. When Yahweh responds with his compassionate touch, the sufferer’s heart will be healed. The disease needs healing, but the first priority is healing of the heart through empathy.

This distinction between “disease” and “illness,” and the priority given to the latter, are carried over into the New Testament, as we see in Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical. He says that although professional competence for healing physical sickness is, without doubt, necessary, “it is not of itself sufficient. . . . We are dealing with human beings . . . [who] . . . need heartfelt concern.”⁸ This is the reason why the pope gives such importance to the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the theme of healing of the heart is given fundamental importance. In the parable, the caregiver seeks to heal the body of the victim; but,

above all, he seeks to respond to the sufferer’s inner pain of rejection. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin highlights this quality of Christian health care in writing that “our distinctive vocation in Christian healthcare is not so much to heal [the sickness] better or more efficiently than anyone else; it is to bring comfort to people by giving them an experience that will strengthen their confidence in life. The ultimate goal of our care is to give those who are ill . . . a reason to hope. . . . In this we find the Christian vocation that makes our healthcare truly distinctive.”⁹

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Having established this important clarification, we are now better prepared to uncover the lessons of the parable of the Good Samaritan for our contemporary health care ministries.¹⁰

THE PARABLE’S EXPLANATION

Significant violence occurs throughout the Good Samaritan story. Violence, we must remember, is not always physical; it is whatever is insensitive to and oppressive of human persons. The parable includes six types of brutality: verbal, physical, social, ritual, racial, and occupational. The story itself, and the way Jesus tells it, provide profound lessons about how to relate to violence with compassion and justice.

The story begins with a Torah scholar or religious lawyer who questions Jesus in a verbally aggressive polemical manner. “And who is my neighbor?” he asks (verse 29). In Hebraic culture, questions phrased in this way were public challenges to personal honor. The lawyer hopes that Jesus will be unable to answer the question, for failure to do so will cause Jesus immense public shame. This is what is meant by the words “But the man was anxious to justify himself” (verse 29).¹¹

The second act of violence is physical: namely, the assault by bandits on an innocent man (verse 30). At those days, it was common for gangs of thugs to terrorize well-off travelers, rob them, and often give the proceeds to the poor.¹² The

victim may have been a wealthy man.

The third act of violence is ritual. Because the victim is covered in blood, he is automatically stigmatized as impure, untouchable, and, therefore, a social outcast. This branding would have caused the victim intense inner pain. People would hesitate to touch him because doing so would render them ritually impure, thereby necessitating lengthy rituals of purification.

The victim has also been stripped of his clothing (verse 30). This is the fourth act of violence. In those days, it was customary to strip prisoners naked before scourging (whipping) them, “and death suffered as much from the shame of involuntary nakedness as from the lash” (Mt 27:28, 31).¹³ To strip a person naked, as Jesus was stripped before being hung on the cross, was the ultimate act of subjugation and social marginalization.

The priest and Levite, two pillars of biblical Jewish culture mentioned in the parable, represent religious fundamentalism of their time. The Israelite tradition required that people must show compassion, especially to those who were poor and marginalized (Is 58: 6-8), but Hebrew fundamentalists discarded this obligation, developing instead a religion that focused on external conformity to rituals of accidental importance. The priest returning from the temple in Jerusalem to his home in the country refuses to help the robbery victim for two reasons: He fears being attacked by bandits himself, but, more importantly, he is not prepared to be defiled by touching the victim (verse 31). The Levite belongs to an order of cultic officials “devoted to the Lord” (Ex 32:28); they were inferior to the priests but nonetheless a privileged group in Hebrew society. But the Levite also declines to help, for the same reasons, although he is pictured as hesitating slightly before making his decision (verse 32).

The figure of the Samaritan traveler can be said to symbolize a fifth form of violence. The Hebrews regarded the heretical Samaritans as racially inferior, and the Samaritans had a similar view of their Hebrew neighbors.¹⁴ The story also contains a sixth example of violence: occupational prejudice and discrimination. Traders in oil and wine, such as the Samaritan, were stigmatized because both Hebrews and Samaritans saw them as having become rich through shady dealings. The Samaritan, like the victim, knows the pain of social rejection and loneliness.

THE SAMARITAN'S QUALITIES

The story's dramatic point, which must have shocked the Hebrews, is that it is a Samaritan—a person considered a religious heretic, and as

racially and occupationally inferior—who spontaneously aids the robbery victim. Those who should have acted—the priest and the Levite—turn their backs on the injured and marginalized victim. Through compassion, the Samaritan breaks through the many layers of violence.

The story details the qualities of the Samaritan. He is courageous because he risks his own life by getting off his mount, his only form of protection, thereby making himself vulnerable to attack by bandits. Every moment he is off his mount, the physical danger to him intensifies. His courage is further tested when he walks the mount to avoid exacerbating the sufferings of the victim, thus further risking an attack. The story's listeners would have known that the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, with its tortuous bends and rocky sides, was ideal for robbers.

In addition to the physical risks, there were the ritual and social costs of touching the victim. We read that the caregiver “bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them” (verse 34). To bandage the victim, the Samaritan must touch him, and since the Samaritans had similar laws about ritual impurity, the caregiver himself becomes himself ritually unclean. This willingness to go to the margins of society in his ministry of healing defines the depth of his compassion. The victim is no doubt deeply comforted by this touch. At last, there is someone who feels with him in his anguish of ritual and social marginalization. We are not told whether the victim survives; but we know with certainty that, through the Samaritan's touch, the victim's inner pain is healed. That is the priority Jesus wished to emphasize.

The Samaritan exercises the gift of hospitality. He gives of his substance, or capital—the oil and wine—that he had intended to sell at the market. In biblical cultures, *hospitality* was never restricted to one's friends or family members; rather, it referred primarily to receiving strangers and being willing to share one's capital goods with them without the expectation of return. Outsiders were invited to cease being strangers and become instead honored guests.¹⁵ The law required this because, the Israelites having been strangers in Egypt, they should themselves show hospitality to strangers (Ex 23:9; Lv 19:33-4). The Book of Leviticus says, “You will treat resident aliens as though they were native-born and love them as yourself” (Lv 19:34). Jesus would develop this further, not only in this parable but through his example and his teachings. People who would receive the disciples of Jesus would, he said, be in fact receiving Jesus himself (Mt 10:40-2). To

offer or refuse hospitality meant that the Gospel had been accepted or rejected.¹⁶

The fifth character in the story, the innkeeper, has a significant role. Unlike the inn of our Western tradition, which is a symbol of security and hospitality, the inn at the time of Christ was a den of thieves, and the inn keeper was the biggest rogue of all. But the Samaritan seeks to build a relationship with this man. The caregiver is no dreamer, out-of-touch with the weaknesses of human nature. Knowing from his own experience what to expect from the innkeeper, the Samaritan simply bribes him in order to guarantee that the patient will be looked after. He leaves the innkeeper a certain amount, but promises more when he returns (Lk 10: 35).

FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS

In his efforts to address the different types of violence shown in the incident, the Good Samaritan exemplifies six truths that should form the foundation of Catholic health care ministry. Each truth contains values or action-oriented priorities.

Creation Is a Gift of God All life must be respected as coming from God. Human persons mirror God's power, in the sense that they can think and act freely, but this freedom must be exercised in ways that respect the purpose of the Creator. Respect for human dignity is a value from which other values flow. Every person should expect from society equitable access to what is necessary to live with dignity, in ways that respect the rights of others. This is the meaning of justice. Hospitality is another value that flows from this truth. When we are hospitable to a stranger, we are only sharing what rightly belongs to all, since all goods ultimately belong to God. Above all, however, the Samaritan is motivated by love of God and neighbor. As God loves the Samaritan, so he wishes to share that love with others, especially those in need.

Stewardship We are called to co-create with God: that is, to continue God's creation in this world in ways that reflect the dignity of God. This truth contains the core values of justice, mercy, compassion, empathy, excellence, and simplicity. Because all creation comes from God, we must use it as stewards of God. Compassion has an interesting origin. "The Samaritan traveller . . . was moved with compassion" (Lk 10:33). Compassion is a value originally founded on kinship obligations, whether natural or symbolic. The Hebrew word is derived from the word for *womb*, implying the need of one person to sympathize for another because they are born of the same mother. God is that mother, and we are all children of that womb and must accordingly feel with, and care for, each

other as brothers and sisters. Thus the Samaritan feels the inner pain of marginalization that the victim—his brother—is experiencing.

The value of excellence flows from the fact that our gifts come from God and are to be used in God's service. Excellence in this sense covers all human endeavors, including research that is at the service of God and humankind. It allows for no selfishness, mediocrity, or laziness in the use of one's talents. The Samaritan exercises this value when he uses his experience concerning human nature in relating to the innkeeper.

Simplicity is not synonymous with ignorance that causes people to act imprudently. On the contrary, people with simplicity act with nothing other than the will of God in mind. Out of love, God gives creation to us to be used as he wishes: namely, with a single-minded commitment to justice and love in the service for others. There is to be no holding back, fuss, pretense, or double-dealing in the simple-hearted as stewards of God's gifts. Such is the example of the Samaritan.

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Community There is no support for individualism in the parable. In the Jewish tradition, people are expected to work together in imitation of God's desire to build community with the Israelites: "I shall fix my home among you . . . I shall be among you; I shall be your God and you will be my people" (Lv 26:11-12). The values of unity, collaboration, dialogue, and mutuality are marks of an authentic community, as is evident in the way the Samaritan acts toward both the victim and the innkeeper. Mutuality is integral to true community. The victim's pain of marginalization reminds the Samaritan of his own similar experience and his need for compassion. This is the victim's gift to the caregiver, and the Samaritan responds by giving priority to the healing of the heart of the sufferer.

The Option for People Who Are Poor In the Scriptures, the phrases "people who are poor" and "the little ones" commonly refer to those who, through no fault of their own, are powerless in society. Structures of oppression condemn them to economic, social, and political poverty. In the parable, Jesus identifies with the actions of the

Samaritan. His primary concern in his ministry is to be with those who are marginalized in society. By his actions and words, Jesus frequently repeats this message: "I was hungry and you gave me food. . . . I was a stranger and you made me welcome" (Mt 25:35). Jesus becomes so closely identified with people who are poor that, when we refuse them justice, we are refusing him. The ultimate test of our concern for human dignity will be the priority we give to people who are especially disadvantaged, people whom society considers worthless, as having nothing to offer society, as second-class citizens.

Holistic Healing Pope John Paul II writes that this parable "not only spurs one to help the sick, but also to do all one can to reintegrate them into society. For Christ, in fact, healing is also this reintegration: just as sickness excludes the human person from the community, so healing must bring him to rediscover his place in the family, in the Church and in society."¹⁷ In addressing the two aspects of sickness—disease and illness—the Samaritan removes the social stigma and poverty that entrap the victim.

Prophetic Role In the parable, to be a prophet is to remind people of the above truths and to be prepared to take the consequences of doing so. As is evident in the Old Testament, the ministry of a prophet is a dangerous one. Because a prophet dares to remind people of the need to respect human dignity, to be compassionate, to be particularly concerned for people who are poor, his or her life is threatened. On the bandit-infested road, the Samaritan not only risks his life for the victim but also, because of his actions, suffers further marginalization by both Hebrew people and those of his own culture. Christ, the storyteller and the ultimate Good Samaritan, will, of course, give his life in the service of others.

WANTED: HEALTH CARE PROPHETS

A nation, a culture, or an organization that forgets its founding story will die. A Catholic health facility is no exception. In the 13th century, St Bonaventure, commenting on the parable, wrote that "the Samaritan poured into the wounds of the half-dead wanderer the wine of fervent zeal and the oil of compassion."¹⁸

To ensure its future, Catholic health care needs prophetic people with fervent zeal who, following the example of Jesus Christ, are able to retell the Samaritan parable with the skills of an engaging storyteller. Notice how Jesus starts with familiar people and scenes and gradually moves

his listeners to a new understanding of realities. He is so accomplished in his role as storyteller that the Torah scholar, having asked Jesus "Who is my neighbor?," eventually finds himself answering his own question. ■

NOTES

1. Pope John Paul II, *Contemplate the Face of Christ in the Sick* (Message for the World Day of the Sick 2000), para. 8.
2. See G. A. Arbuckle, *Violence, Society and the Church: A Cultural Approach*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2003, pp. 219-222.
3. Pope John Paul II, para. 9.
4. Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, para. 31a.
5. Pope Benedict XVI, par. 31b.
6. See G. A. Arbuckle, *Healthcare Ministry: Refounding the Mission in Tumultuous Times*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2000, pp. 14-15.
7. See C. G. Helman, *Culture, Health and Illness: An Introduction for Health Professionals*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, England, 1994, pp. 101-145.
8. Pope Benedict XVI, para. 31a.
9. J. Bernardin, *A Sign of Hope: A Pastoral Letter on Healthcare*, October 18, 1995, pp. 5, 7.
10. See B. H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA, 1998, pp. 101-118; B. J. Malina and R. L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992, pp. 346-348; B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Prophet: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989, pp. 189-202; N. M. Alexander, et al., eds., *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles, Introduction, Commentary*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1995, pp. 228-230; and J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, Doubleday, New York City, 1985) pp. 887-890.
11. This common, negative interpretation of the scholar's question is disputed by L. Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2006, p. 132.
12. See Malina and Rohrbaugh, p. 404.
13. J. J. Pilch and B. J. Malina, eds., *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA, 1993, p. 121.
14. See J. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1968, p. 766.
15. See Pilch and Malina, pp. 104-107.
16. See A. J. Malherbe, "Hospitality," in B. M. Metzger and M. D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Oxford University Press, New York City, 1993, pp. 292-93.
17. Pope John Paul II, p. 15.
18. St. Bonaventure, *The Virtues of a Religious Superior*, S. Mollitor, trans., B. Herder, St. Louis, 1920, p. 30.



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