

On March 18, 1958 the Trappist monk Thomas Merton was running errands for his monastery in downtown Louisville when he had a mystical experience he described in his book, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander. He said, "In Louisville, at the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Walnut . . . I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud . . . I have the immense joy of being a man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Two weeks ago I preached on the Good Samaritan. I had some people react to it in ways that I would like to address in today's homily. I'll briefly recap the homily for those who weren't there. I gave an

account of the Samaritans and their theological and social conflict with the Jews, and how Jesus noted this, and proclaimed the Jewish theological stance to be correct. But He never treated the Samaritans as evil. In fact, they were often the “good Guys” in the Gospels.

But I then put Jesus’ call to be charitable to one’s adversaries in the context of the contemporary American social and political situation. I preached about the downward spiral of a society when its members go from viewing those who disagree with them from being mistaken, to being wrong, to being dangerous, to being evil. If we want to feel the point of Jesus’ parable then, I suggested, if you are a progressive member of the anti-Trump resistance you should imagine the Good Samaritan as wearing a red “Make America Great Again” hat. And if you are a Pro-Trump Populist maybe the Good Samaritan is an undocumented immigrant wearing a rainbow T-shirt. We must resist the temptation to view people on the “other side” as evil.

After the homily I had a man come up and question me. He had grown up in Poland under the Communist regime. He said it's easy to say one's opponents aren't evil, but there really is evil that must be confronted and fought. He'd experienced it. Another person had liked the homily but said there were evil forces at work in America that need to be stopped. So, today I want to look at those concerns.

I want to begin with the Gospel today – and the “Our Father” Jesus teaches His Apostles. The Lord’s Prayer appears twice in the Gospels, here in Luke 11 and again in Matthew 6. Luke’s version we heard today is shorter. Most of us have memorized Matthew’s version. I’m engaging both forms in this homily. I want to concentrate on just one word in it, the word “our.” Matthew’s version begins with the phrase “Our Father.” And both go on to say, “Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our sins (or trespasses).” This is important because it reminds us that Jesus wants us to pray as a family, the whole Body of Christ. It’s not My Father who art in Heaven . . . give me this

day my daily bread and forgive me my sins.” The Our Father is meant to open us to our connections to other members in the Body of Christ.

This is at the heart of Merton’s experience of communion on the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Walnut. He experienced concretely what Jesus taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The scholar of the law who confronted Him assumed, like most Jews of the time, that “neighbor” meant fellow-Jews, not Gentiles, ideological heretics, and other opponents. The question running through this debate is rooted there. How and where do Disciples of Christ put limits and boundaries on whom they are willing to consider brothers and sisters (and neighbors)?

To turn to the objections of those people I just mentioned – yes, evil is real and must be confronted. In fact, I believe that we post-modern people tend to underestimate the weight of evil, and the dark mystery behind it. But even bracketing that mystery, it isn’t difficult to sense evil on the move. I believe we are facing grave crises today in the nation, world, and Church. We human beings explain and motivate

ourselves through ideas, words, and ideologies. Some of these are mistaken, wrong, dangerous, even evil. These are the source of our anxieties driving the emotions and fears more and more of us are feeling. And, yes, those evils ideas must be opposed courageously.

Here I go back to what I said in my previous homily about how Jesus interacted with the Samaritans. He did not pretend, out of a desire not to offend, that the Samaritans' theology was correct, or that it didn't matter. He told the Samaritan woman at the well, "You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand because salvation is from the Jews." Increasingly Disciples of Christ are going to be called to act in similar ways. We must draw lines and boundaries against dangerous and evil ideas and their consequences.

But it is the ideas that are evil, not the people holding them. It is the actions flowing from those ideas that are evil, not the actors. That was my point in my previous homily. This is a difficult distinction to maintain, but Jesus did it. He prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive

them, they know not what they do.” He never drew a line between the people who were his brothers and sisters and those who were too far gone in evil to count as such.

We are increasingly drawing such lines. Many of the issues dividing us stem from lines and boundaries being drawn in our minds and hearts. Sometimes it’s a matter of race or class. Some of us leave immigrants, others leave the unborn, beyond the line marking out the neighbor, brother, sister, who’s worthy of receiving mercy. Under the pressure of fear, we’re in danger of forgetting the “Our” in the Our Father. In these times – and at all times -- if we’re to preserve our sanity and even our souls we must erase lines, not draw them. Merton saw a glimpse of this reality that day. We’re all made in the image and likeness of God. We are all shining like the sun. Some of us are wrong. Some of us believe things that will make life horrible. But none of us are evil. We all have God as Our Father.