

A Homily/Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 11, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Three separate characters or three parts of us all?

The story that we have come to think of as THE GOOD SAMARITAN is probably one of the most familiar Bible texts of all. Millions of children and adults in church services and in Sunday School classes have heard, generation after generation, about the difference between selfishness and generosity. We know all of the characters in this story: a traveler who gets mugged while on a business trip; the robbers who beat that guy up, took everything he had, and left him—battered and bruised—by the side of the road, thinking that he was dead; the nice religious people who felt sorry for the victim but couldn't be bothered to stop and lend a helping hand; and, finally, the Samaritan—just a stranger, a passerby, who couldn't stand to see a fellow human being suffering, someone who went out of his way to make sure the injured man got the care he needed in order to survive.

The story seems, at least on the surface, to be a simple little morality play. The message seems so obvious that it's hardly worth thinking about: Some people are wicked or selfish and don't really care about others. On the other hand, there are a few really nice folks who will go out of their way to help those who are in need. The moral of the story clearly is that God wants us all to try to be like the nice folks, not violent like the thieves and not selfish and uncaring like those who claim to be religious but really can't be bothered by anyone else's problems.

It would seem that this story is about three different characters and the way they deal with others. We have a thief who cares NOTHING about the traveler except as someone to harm and to use. Then, we have the passersby who maybe feel a twinge of pity but have no trouble ignoring the injured man because they, of course, have much more important things to do. And, finally, there's the stranger—an outsider, a Samaritan who knows all about being the victim of prejudice and oppression—someone who cares as much about others as he does for himself. Three characters, three attitudes, three orientations toward life. Perhaps we could summarize them as:

The THIEF says: What's yours is mine if I can take it.

The PASSERBY says: What's mine is mine if I can keep it.

The SAMARITAN says: What mine is yours if you truly need it.

I'm not really sure whether Jesus is talking about three different, separate characters or is he, perhaps, talking about three parts of each one of us—three "voices" that are alive and well within the heart and mind of each human being. It seems to me that maybe Jesus is not just telling a simple little morality story where we can hate the bad guys and like the good guy. It just might be that Jesus is describing motivations or temptations that every one of us carries around all the time. We have to choose which one we will listen to and act upon. We're never

completely free of all three “voices” competing for our attention and trying to pull us toward one of the three life-options: taking, ignoring, or sharing.

If you're like most people, you have played all three roles in this drama at various times, taking, ignoring, and sharing. The choice, at every moment of life, is up to us.

Let me give you an example of how we human beings act like the thieves, taking from others who are vulnerable. If you had a glass of orange juice this morning you are part of a TAKING activity. You and I benefit from the labor of migrants who are paid little or nothing to harvest the crops that we tend to take for granted. They are forced to live in ignorance, poverty, and disease so that you and I can get fresh produce at bargain prices. Does that bother you; cause you to feel a sense of guilt? Would you be willing to pay more for your orange juice if you knew that the money would go directly to underpaid farm workers?

Or let's think about IGNORING. Isn't it interesting that when a hurricane, an earthquake, tornados, oil spills, tsunamis, or floods come along we will send some money to help those who are homeless and starving but, all too soon, we forget all about it, moving on to our regular routine without another thought for those who are suffering. Right here in our own super-wealthy nation—even in the middle of our country's capital city—there are slums and ghettos that are no better than those of third world countries. Do we care at all? All us here have busy lives, important responsibilities, and personal challenges so how could we possibly do anything for others whom we don't even know?

Then, let's think about SHARING. All of you—the people who make up this Chapel community—I know to be genuinely ready to reach out to others. I have seen your generosity expressed through special offerings and the commitment of volunteer time, your warm welcome to anyone who comes through these doors, and your determination that this Church will take a stand on behalf of persons rejected and ridiculed by others. Your time, treasure, and talent have been poured out in measure incredibly beyond what anyone could ever have expected. I know that you understand what it means to SHARE.

What I'm getting at is that, inside our own being—individually and corporately—there are always three “voices” engaged in a kind of tug-of-war for our hearts, and minds, and souls. What Jesus tells us in his story of The Good Samaritan is that we can have the honesty to recognize when we are being and doing those things that are selfish, not doing anything at all, or actually seeking ways to address the needs by sharing the blessings that have been given to us so abundantly. We can have the honesty to acknowledge and repent when we fall short and we can also give thanks when, with God's grace, we manage to show concern; when we truly act as the neighbor for others who need our love and compassion.

So, I invite you this morning to think about this story of The Good Samaritan in what may be a new way for you. Which interior “voice” is getting your attention—Taking, Ignoring, or Sharing? It's really up to **you**.