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United Church of Christ
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Christian Charity

(Fifth in series, *Christian Wisdom for Life, Ten Easy Verses*)

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. I
-John 4:17-

(Supporting Text — Luke 10:29-37)

The parable of the Good Samaritan may be one of the best known stories that Jesus told. Like other gospel parables it retains its relevance to every generation because its truth is timeless.

One thing the parable might especially do for us today is define what real charity is. I wonder if what is sometimes called charity now is really at least in part self-interest for them. The charity of the Good Samaritan, on the other hand, was extended on the basis of God's kind of love, which is completely self *disinterested*, except for the pleasure of loving itself.

Only caring which is completely self-disinterested merits the title Christian charity. And it is not a weak concept. Heavens no! It is only for the strong and secure; those who are capable of caring about others as well as themselves.

Jesus first told the parable of the Good Samaritan while in conversation with a lawyer who asked Jesus what a person needed to do in order to receive eternal life. Jesus asked what the law said. In answer, the man repeated what is known as the Great Commandment, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.* Jesus said, *good answer! Do that and you will live.* But perhaps because his mind was trained in legal distinctions the man was still not satisfied, so he asked Jesus, *Who is my neighbor?* It was at that point that Jesus told him the parable. Jesus wanted to explain to the man who his neighbor was, who it was exactly that the man was supposed to love with all the respect and kindness with which he loved God and himself.

So, who was that man's neighbor? Who is the person of such a circumstance that only Christian charity is rigorous enough to meet the need?

Well, one thing we might notice about the neighbor is that he was a complete stranger to the one who helped him. For the Good Samaritan charity might have begun at home but it did not end there. The Good Samaritan had never before even met or seen the wounded man and after delivering him to the inn there is no mention in the story that the two would ever again meet. Christian charity extends itself sometimes to complete strangers.

Another thing we might note about the wounded neighbor is that not only was he a stranger, he was a foreigner. He was of a different culture. In the specific case of the parable, the wounded man was a Jew, and the helping stranger a Samaritan. A Samaritan was at most only part Jewish and lived in the northern regions of Israel. Over the years, residents there had mixed their blood lines and cultures with surrounding ethnic groups as well as with the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans which had taken turns invading ancient northern Palestine. Jews and Samaritans considered themselves to be completely different nationalities and ethnicities. Further, to a full blooded Jew, the Samaritan was a most inferior person. The most bigoted ancient Jews would not even converse with a Samaritan.

So what we know of the neighbor so far is that he was a stranger, a person of different culture and ethnicity, and a foreigner. Can we begin to see how distinctive the idea of Christian charity really is? But there is more.

Not only was the neighbor a stranger, a person of different ethnicity, and a foreigner, he was also in his predicament in part due to his own mistake. Although the wounded man was a victim of bandits who perpetrated a terrible crime against him, people at that time knew better than to walk the road from Jericho to Jerusalem by themselves. That road was notorious for raiding thieves. Sensible people only traveled it in well escorted caravans.

Finally, the neighbor was person whose troubles were unknown to most of the world. Victims on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem were not a cause célèbre. Without the Good Samaritan the wounded man would have fallen through the proverbial cracks. Society at large would most likely never know what the Good Samaritan did.

So this is how Jesus answered the man who asked, “Who is my Neighbor?” The neighbor is a stranger and person of different cultural background whose problems are not a popular cause and at least in part his or her own fault. To reach out in love and mercy to that person, Jesus says, is to fulfill the Great Commandment.

Now if we compare that description of the neighbor with what might often pass for charity today we might see just how watered down the term has sometimes become. Part of the problem may be the modern need to legally recognize some things as charities

for tax purposes. This has led to the term charity becoming almost synonymous with the term non-profit, but from the perspective of the parable of the Good Samaritan, some non-profits appear to be more charitable than others.

Let me try and exemplify this first with a non-profit organization which I believe is important and in which Debbie and I participate, the American Civil Liberties Union. We have been members for years and our dues count as a charitable deduction for us with the IRS and yet it is very much a self-interest for us. We want to preserve what we believe to be among the most basic traditional American values. We want to protect our own civil liberties. In that way the ACLU would be a worthy cause but it is not a Christian charity.

Consider an organization like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP. This is another most worthy cause. The NAACP has played a critical role in the struggle for justice and social progress for America's minorities. But when an African American joins the NAACP, is it an act of Christian charity or self-interest?

Or take the NRA, the National Rifle Association. The NRA is a non-profit organization, but is a contribution to the National Rifle Association by a person who wants to protect his or her own right to possess a gun an act of Christian charity? Countless other examples might be added: the American Association of Retired Persons, any political party, as well as universities and hospitals. They are all causes worthy of our support but are they Christian charities?

As people of God we are called to care for the absolute stranger who might also be of a different culture, who looks and acts in other ways than we do, with whom we might disagree politically, whose problems are neither well known nor a popular cause and may be at least in part his or her own fault, for whom few others are caring, and when few others will ever know about the care that we have given. That is our high calling. That is what it means for Christians to love their neighbor as they love God, themselves, and their own families.

Let's remember too that being a neighbor is a mutual sort of thing. Both the wounded Jew and the Good Samaritan were neighbors of each other. Who knows but that their roles could soon be reversed with the Samaritan needing a kindness of some sort from the Jew? The neighbor gives and the neighbor receives, and *as you have done it unto the least of these*, Jesus said, *you have done it unto me.* -Matthew 25:45-