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"Come away by yourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile!..." Mark 6:31
Are you ready to accept the invitation?

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The Good What?!

The Good Samaritan. There are hospitals by that name. Charitable organizations around the world have borrowed that name. And of course, we apply it to individuals who, usually at some cost to themselves, do a good deed for another. It's a name likely to bring about a warm feeling inside. But that would not have been the case for Jesus' audience; in fact, quite the opposite. By his time, the relationship between Jews and Samaritans had been one of mutual hatred and hostility for six centuries. Two incidents from Scripture will illustrate: Samaria (then known as Shechem) was the site of the rape of Jacob's daughter, Dinah (read the whole story in Genesis 34). Centuries later, the false judge Abimelech murdered his rivals in Shechem/Samaria (it's all in the Book of Judges, chapters 8-9). So to Jesus' audience, the idea of a "good Samaritan" would have made about as much sense as describing someone as a "good rapist," or a "good murderer."

Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to a question asked by a scholar of the Torah: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" It must have been on his "To Do" list for that day: 1. Go to the market; 2. Check out a scroll from the synagogue library; 3. Pick up the kids; 4. Inherit eternal life. Apparently he did not yet realize that he was already going to live forever (and maybe we don't realize that either).

It reminds me of a story one of my professors used to tell: "Jesus promises you two things: 1. Your life has meaning; and 2. You're going to live forever. If someone makes you a better offer than that, take it!"

Of course, being a scholar of the Law, the questioner already knew the answer: Love God, love your neighbor. But then, that second question: "Who is my neighbor?" That's also his way of asking, who is not my neighbor? Whom do I not have to love? After all, let's be reasonable – there's got to be a limit to this love-business!

And Jesus answers with the parable. The command to love includes even the individuals and groups whom he, or I, have been taught to hate. Like the Samaritans. Like... Well, like who? Which people, which religions, which nationalities, which economic or ethnic or political or sexual groups have I been taught to hate? Which group could I find it impossible to believe might contain even one good member? All kinds of supposedly justified violence results from precisely that attitude; and this nation, and many others, are being torn apart because of it.

Maybe it's time to read this story again (it's in Luke 10:25-37), and pray that it might change my heart – and maybe yours too.

Fr. J. Patrick Foley (with help from the insights of Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

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