

WHO IS THE VICTIM?

Contributed by Jim Jordal
Monday, 06 February 2012

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By Jim Jordal

And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

From the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:30, KJV

Several weeks ago I wrote about the three attitudes toward wealth illustrated by Christ in his Parable of the Good Samaritan. Today I wish to elaborate further on the unfortunate traveler who is victimized in the parable.

Parables illustrate biblical truths and principles as they apply to everyday life. Many of them (called kingdom parables) begin with the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven is like…" These use simple stories understandable by uneducated villagers to compare their tortured lives with what God promises in the millennial kingdom of his Son. They chronicle injustices and inequities that make up the human condition, most often in the struggles against the economic oppression so evident in Jewish life at that time. They are metaphors for life, if you will, and as such have application to widely varied situations. Metaphors have universal meaning in any culture because they describe what it means to be human and to be constantly assaulted by injustices perpetrated by people of wealth and power.

In this parable the victim is without identity except that he was a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. The emphasis is entirely on how he was treated once his plight became known. The usual explanation of this parable is that we should not behave as the passing priest and Levite did in ignoring the injured man, but should do what the Samaritan did in providing whatever aid was needed with no expectation of reward. In fact, the very phrase "Good Samaritan" has entered the lexicon as a name for various charitable organizations and also for people who go out of their way to help people in situations beyond the ordinary.

But this parable is a metaphor for life, allowing the symbolism of the victim to be applied in many ways. We usually think of the victim as an innocent individual falling into trouble not of his own making. And that is certainly the common explanation. But could not the victim also represent women victimized by sexism or tribal injustice? Could not the victim be a family driven out of their home by foreclosure, or an indigenous tribe having its territory exploited and seized by major oil companies, or even a nation suffering under a cruel, capricious domination system? Could not the victim be the natural world "bloodied and beaten" by greedy, predatory corporations destroying land, sea and air in search of profit?

Could not the status of victim be applied to almost every human experience, especially in the economic, political and social realms?

That's the beauty of parables: They speak of greed, oppression, suffering, justice, mercy in the Great Dance that is the human experience. They speak of every man and every woman. They speak of evil and injustice, but also allude to deliverance and release. They are thus apt metaphors for the human condition.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan speaks loudly about life in America today. Predatory corporations and their political cronies parade their good intentions while driving consumers to despair over job losses, foreclosures, low wages, high prices and all the other injustices to which we are now becoming accustomed. Private equity funds swoop down on struggling companies to strip them of any available assets, load them with debt, then leave them to face mounting losses and eventual bankruptcy. But who cares about the victims, whether they are other investors, foreign nations, or fickle, gullible consumers? Who cares if consumers eat themselves into early deaths by consuming cheap, highly caloric prepared food loaded with sugar, fats, and salt, not to mention preservative chemicals too numerous to mention? And who cares if medical costs go through the roof because of the epidemic of degenerative disease brought on by sedentary lifestyles, job stress and poor food? Who cares?

Well, it's not the bandits profiting from the people's distress. Nor is it the complacent, holier-than-thou religious Pharisees that populate many of America's churches. Nor is it many of our political leaders who care more about their campaign funds than the suffering of their constituents.

But there still is someone who cares: God cares. He pronounces evil on those who are "not grieved for the affliction of Joseph." And he has a small but faithful group of followers who also care. Why don't you become one of them?