

Homily for 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

It is called Jericho Road. It is a 17 mile-long roadway that connects Jerusalem to Jericho. In that 17 mile distance the road drops some 3600 feet. It becomes a steep, winding, descending, remote road that for centuries has been a place of robberies, violence and oppression. Allow me to take you to that road as I weave a story...a story that compliments the Gospel and hopefully will give you food for thought.

One day a priest was traveling on Jericho Road. He saw someone who had been hurt. He came and gave that person the last rites, and then he quickly ran back to his parish as fast as he could. The following Sunday, he gave a sterling sermon about Jericho Road...and he felt so much better.

Then there was a rabbi who went down to Jericho Road and viewed the same individual lying on the side of the road. He immediately returned to his synagogue where he organized a course entitled "The Biblical Understanding and Perspective of Poverty." During this course films of people beaten on Jericho Road were shown. Everyone felt terrible...yet they all felt so good that they had finally done something positive to become enlightened about the problems of Jericho Road.

Then there was a community organizer who didn't travel on Jericho Road but saw the whole thing on television. He gathered some 65,000 people who sang songs, offered prayers and demonstrated their shock and concern over Jericho Road.

Finally a politician heard about Jericho Road and became aware of the individual lying on the side of the road. He thought: "We've got to solve this problem; we've got to raise employment and change the economy so there won't be so much violence on Jericho Road." So what did he do? He reduced taxes for the rich, so the rich would have more money to make investments so there would be more jobs for the poor.

While the priest, the rabbi, the community organizer and the politician were all busy, the person on Jericho Road died.

Jericho Road is a real place...perhaps better said, it is a symbol. It is a symbol of suffering in the world. And we encounter Jericho Road in many different ways. We find it at traffic lights when homeless people stand there with signs that reads: "Help me." How do we respond? Do we sit there and think how awful it is that "these people" are being allowed to intrude on our lives and harrass us? I wonder.

We find Jericho Road in nursing homes and institutions filled with people who never get a visitor. Do we respond or just find ourselves always wanting to do something, but never having the time?

Or maybe Jericho Road is a place where a person standing next to us at Mass lives. Living there because of loneliness or fear, serious illness or grief. Do we care? Do we extend a caring spirit to the people with whom we worship or work with....or even live with? Are we willing to simply shake their hands as we exchange peace with them? Or do we refrain from touching them for fear of getting too close to the pain of another?

The call to compassion and human kindness is the heart and essence of today's Gospel. It isn't hard but it is challenging. Challenging because it asks us to step outside of ourselves and not just pass by those in need. Jericho Road is always with us. There is always someone on the side of the road. Christ says to us...we are the neighbor who can make all the difference in the world...it's up to us.