

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C
Deuteronomy 30:10-14
Psalm 69:14, 17, 30-31, 33-34, 36, 37
Colossians 1:15-20
Luke 10:25-37
Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
The University of Portland

In my academic work, I look for the theology contained in literature that isn't specifically religious - mostly novels. Close and careful reading is my primary tool. My working assumption is that there is more going on in a text than is immediately evident. I'm alert for patterns in a story. When I think I've found one, I reflect upon its possible meaning. I might ask myself, for example, why so many characters in a particular novel are described as having trouble with their eyes, or why they always eat alone, or why so much of the language and imagery has to do with horses. I take it for granted that the surface meaning of a narrative isn't the whole story. Sometimes, when I meet the authors of books I have studied, I share my discoveries with them. I lay out for them the patterns I have found, and suggest what they might mean. The authors often acknowledge that the deeper meaning was intended. But, occasionally they will remark that they had no intention of conveying a deeper meaning. They were just telling a story. As far as they are concerned, it simply means what it says.

Historically, literary criticism has its roots in the study of scripture. Over the centuries, methods developed in the interpretation of the Bible were carried over to the study of secular texts. So perhaps it isn't surprising that in our First Reading this week, Moses sounds a bit like one of the authors I've described. The text he is discussing is the book of the

law. He insists that its meaning is not remote. It is not up in the sky somewhere so that it needs to be explained. “No, it is something very near to you...you only have to carry it out.” Don’t wait around for someone to explain its hidden meaning. Just do what it tells you to do.

Jesus makes a similar point in our Gospel, when a scholar of the law asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Our Lord asks him what is written in the law. The scholar responds, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus replies, in effect, “That’s right, so go do it.” But the scholar won’t let it rest. He insists on a definition of who, exactly, is our neighbor. Jesus answers the question with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the parable, a man has been beaten by robbers and left for dead. A priest and a Levite see the man in the road, but pass by without coming to his aid. Presumably they do so because they are on their way to the temple in Jerusalem to carry out their priestly duties. If they were to touch a bloodied man they would be made ritually impure and unable to carry out their liturgical role. Then, a Samaritan comes along and looks after the injured man. It is clear that Jesus believes the duty of the priest and Levite was perfectly plain. They should have abandoned their subtle interpretation of the law and helped the poor man lying in the road right in front of them.

And so, of course, should we. Jesus Christ is the perfect self-revelation of God. God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is a mystery that unfolds in time, but which can never be exhausted. The reverent, loving exploration of that mystery is a profound privilege and deep joy that we readily embrace. But while God is a mystery, what God wants us to do is

not. In the words of our psalm, our neighbor is “afflicted and in pain.”
We need to do something about it. It’s time we got our hands dirty.