

The Good Samaritan – A look at Thomas Merton's Essay

This essay was originally written in 1961 and published in Seasons of Celebration which was released in 1965.

Summary:

"Who is my neighbor?"

This is a useless question therefore Christ didn't answer it. Yet he did not pass by without attention. On the contrary, He saw it as an indication of the scribe's plight and our own. Instead of answering the question, He poured oil and wine into the wounds...

Layers of the essay:

1. The Human Condition – Classification and Judgement
2. A look at how authentic Love works
3. Chesed is God('s Love)
4. Our deepest Identity and calling is to be a chasid
5. Wrapping it all up – binding ourselves and others to God in Chesed

The Human Condition – Classification and Judgement

First let us remember that while to us all Samaritans are Good Samaritans, it was not so to those who first heard the parable. In their eyes all Samaritans were, by the very fact, bad. Indeed that was why a Samaritan had to be the subject of the parable... We on the other hand accept Samaritans without difficulty as good, having identified ourselves with them. All Samaritans are good in our eyes because we consider ourselves Samaritans. Since we have come to regard ourselves as good Samaritans, do we not perhaps consider that Jews are less good than ourselves? In that case we will not understand the parable at all, for we shall imagine that the priest and levite passed by the wounded man just because they were Jews. And we shall think that it was because the Samaritan was both "good" and Samaritan" that he helped him. But if we interpret the parable in this way we close our minds to its meaning. For **neither the Jew nor the Samaritan is our neighbor in any exclusive or comforting sense.**

...in order to prove that he had a real problem, the lawyer asked again: "Who is my neighbor?" We can perhaps assume that he meant by this he had no problem about loving God, since "God is good," but that **he was perplexed about loving his neighbor, since some men are better than others and all are imperfect.** This being the case, in order to protect himself against loving an unworthy object and thus wasting his love, he wanted to know

where to draw the line. Who is the neighbor to be loved, who is the alien not to be loved? The question is a matter of classification. Therefore it is a matter of judgment also, for to classify is to judge. How then does one classify people, and judge them accurately as worthy of love, or of hatred, or of indifference? **This is a pretty question. But to the Lord it was a question that had no meaning, for He said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged." Do not classify, and do not be classified.**

A look at how authentic Love works

THE PARABLE seems not to answer this question, or at least not to answer it directly. **For the lawyer is saying, "How shall I identify my neighbor, in order actively to give him the love that is commanded by God?" and Christ gives an example of one who needs love, and who passively receives love from someone who falls outside the category of "neighbor." And yet the Samaritan is constituted a "neighbor" by the fact that he gives love. Now what this answer really says is more than the scribe explicitly asked. For the answer cuts right through the knot of the question.**

Christ does not tell the scribe how to judge and classify but teaches him that classifications are without significance in this matter of love. For we do not and cannot love according to classifications. Or if we do, then we do not love in the full sense of the word. Love is free; it does not depend on the desirability of its object but loves for love's sake. But if love submits itself to an object, to a good outside itself, it tends to its own destruction. If it confers good upon its object, then it thrives and grows. For the nature of love is to give as well as to receive. It both gives and receives, but it gives first, and in giving it receives. Therefore if love demands first of all to receive a good from its object, before beginning to love, then it can never begin to love.

If a man has to be pleasing to me, comforting, reassuring, before I can love him, then I cannot truly love him. Not that love cannot console or reassure! But if I demand first to be reassured, I will never dare to love.

If a man has to be a Jew or a Christian before I can love him, then I cannot love him. If he has to be black or white before I can love him, then I cannot love him. If he has to belong to my political party or social group before I can love him, if he has to wear my kind of uniform, then my love is no longer love because it is not free: it is dictated by something outside myself. It is dominated by an appetite other than love. I love not the person but his classification, and in that event I love him not as a person but as a thing. I love his label which confirms me in attachment to my own label. But in that case I do not even love myself. I value myself not for what I am, but for my label, my classification. In this way I remain at the mercy of forces outside myself, and those who seem to me to be neighbors are indeed strangers for I am first of all a stranger to myself.

DO YOU THINK perhaps this is the meaning of the parable: that all men are to be loved because they are men? Because they are human, and have the same nature? No, this is not the meaning. This would be simply a matter of extending the classification to its broadest limits, and including all men in one big category, "Man."

Chesed is (God's Love)

Christ means more than this however, for **He gives a more than philosophical answer. His answer is a divine revelation**, not a natural ethical principle. **It is a revelation of the mystery of God.** Hence in revealing truth it remains mysterious and in some sense hidden. Yet if we get as close as we can to the source of revelation, we can gain deeper insight into the mystery.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a revelation of God in a word that has great importance through all the Scriptures from the beginning to the end. It is a revelation of what the prophet Hosea says, speaking for the invisible God, **"I will have mercy and not sacrifices."** **What is this mercy which we find spoken of everywhere in the Scriptures, and especially in the Psalms?**

... the Hebrew word which we render as mercy, misericordia, says more still than mercy.

Chesed (mercy) is also fidelity, it is also strength. It is the faithful, the indefectible mercy of God. It is ultimate and unailing because it is the power that binds one person to another, in a covenant of hearts. It is the power that binds us to God because He has promised us mercy and will never fail in His promise. For He cannot fail. **It is the power and the mercy which are most characteristic of Him, which come nearer to the mystery into which we enter when all concepts darken and evade us.**

There are other attributes of God which are further from Him and nearer to ourselves. They come and go in the Scriptures. **They are flashes and presences, they appear and disappear as if they were in some sense provisional, as if they were approximations: too partial! For all concepts of God have to be corrected and completed in so far as they are analogies. Some however more than others. For example the metaphor that He is angry, when in fact He is not angry.... But when we say that He does all these things, He does not do them but something else which we do not understand.** And when it has been said that He is angry it has only been said that it seemed to us that He was angry. We are saying that if we had been in His place we would have been angry and would have struck. But because "my thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord," there is something much nearer the truth which appears on a far more transcendent level when the anger vanishes. This is the sun which does not change, behind the passing clouds which are other aspects of God. **This unchanging, fundamental, stable element is the mystery which is revealed in the Hebrew word chesed.**

Again chesed is something more than mercy. But it contains in itself many varied aspects of God's love which flash forth in mercy and are its fountain and its hidden source...

The chesed of God is a gratuitous mercy that considers no fitness, no worthiness, and no return. It is the way the Lord looks upon the guilty and with His look makes them at once innocent. This look seems to some to be anger because they fly from it. But if they face it they see that it is love and that they are innocent. (Their flight and the confusion of their own fear make them guilty.) **The chesed of God is truth. It is infallible strength.** It is the love by which He seeks and chooses His chosen, and binds them to Himself. **It is the love by which He is married to mankind, so that if humanity is faithless to Him it must still always have a fidelity to which to return: that is His own fidelity.** For He has become inseparable from man in the chesed which we call Incarnation, and Passion, and Resurrection. He has also given us His chesed in the Person of His Spirit. The Paraclete is the full, inexpressible mystery of chesed. **So that in the depths of our own being there is an inexhaustible spring of mercy and of love.**

[Our deepest Identity and calling is to be a chasid](#)

Our own being has become love. Our own self has become God's love for us, and it is full of Christ, of chesed. But we must face it and accept it. We must accept ourselves and others as chesed. We must be to ourselves and to others signs and sacraments of mercy.

Chesed, MERCY AND POWER, manifests itself visibly in the Chasid, or the saint. Indeed the saint is one whose whole life is immersed in the chesed of God. The saint is the instrument of the divine mercy through the chasid the love of God reaches into the world in a visible mystery, a mystery of poverty and love, meekness and power.

The chasid is in many respects a foolish one, who has been made comical by mercy. The apparent tragedy of his nothingness is turned inside out with joy. In his folly the divine wisdom shines forth and his annihilation is a new creation, so that he rejoices in the incongruity of the divine mercies and is everlastingly astonished at the creative love of God. He calls upon all beings to praise this love with him, and most of them do not pay attention. Yet the sun and moon and the sea and the hills and stars join him, nevertheless, in praising chesed. **The majority of men, perhaps, consider him crazy. (God, too, is glad to be thought crazy in His chasid. For the wisdom of God is folly in the eyes of men.)**

The folly of the chasid is manifested in his love and concern for his neighbor, the sinner. For the sinner is "next to" the chasid or the saint. They are so close to one another, so like one another, that they are sometimes almost indistinguishable.

The professionally pious man, on the contrary, makes a whole career out of being evidently distinguishable from sinners. He wants it to be very clear to God and to man that he and the sinner are in different categories. **Hence the love of the chasid for the sinner (and of the sinner for the Chasid) is not the patronizing concern of the pious and respectable, but the impractical concern of one who acts as if he thought he were the sinner's mother.** Such a one behaves like the Samaritan in the parable, and not like the priest and levite, who were well

aware of proprieties, and classifications, and categories. Who knows? Perhaps the priest took a look at the character lying in the ditch and observed that he had blood all over him and that it would never do to contract a ritual impurity. Especially out here in the desert, miles from water, **Those who are professionally respectable and whose lives are measured out in long and formal ceremonies, have other and more urgent things to do than to be instruments of chesed.**

Wrapping it all up - binding ourselves and others to God in Chesed

WHO, THEN, is my neighbor? To whom am I bound? Who must I love?

These are not intelligent questions, and they do not have clear answers. On the contrary any attempt to answer them involves us in endless subtleties, and vagueness, and ultimate confusion.

Love is not limited by classifications. The measure of love that Christ has set for us is beyond measure: we must 'be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect.' But what is meant by the "perfection" of the heavenly Father? It is impartiality, not in the sense of justice that measures out equally to all, knowing their merits, but in the sense of chesed that knows no classification of good and evil, just or unjust. "For He sends His rain upon the just and the unjust."

We are bound to God in chesed. The power Of His mercy has taken hold of us and will not let go of us: therefore we have become foolish. And because we have emptied ourselves in this folly which He has sent upon us, we can be moved by His unpredictable wisdom, so that we love whom we love and we help whom we help, not according to plans of our own but according to the measure laid down for us in His hidden Will, which knows no measure.

In this folly, which is the work of His Spirit, we must love especially those who are helpless and who can do nothing for themselves. We must also receive love from them, realizing our own helplessness, and our own inability to fend for ourselves. Chesed has made us as though we were outcasts and sinners. Chesed has numbered us among the aliens and strangers: **chesed has not only robbed us of our reason but declassified us along with everyone else, in the sight of God.** Thus we have no home, and no family, and no niche of worthiness in society, and no recognizable function. Nor do we even appear to be especially charitable, and we cannot pride ourselves on virtue. **Chesed has apparently robbed us of all that, for he who lives by the mercy of God alone shall have nothing else to live by, only that mercy. Plenitudo legis est charitas. Mercy fulfills the whole law.**

THE MYSTERY of the Good Samaritan, then, is this: the mystery of chesed, power and mercy. In the end, it is Christ Himself who lies wounded by the roadside. It is Christ who comes by in the person of the Samaritan. And Christ is the bond, the compassion and the understanding

between them. This is how the Church is made of living stones, compacted together in mercy.

Where there is on the one hand a helpless one, beaten and half dead, and on the other an outcast with no moral standing, and the one leans down in pity to help the other, then there takes place a divine epiphany and an awakening. There is "man," there reality is made human, and in answer to this movement of compassion a Presence is made on the earth, and the bright cloud of the majesty of God overshadows their poverty and their love. There may be no consolation in it. There may be nothing humanly charming about it. It is not necessarily like the movies. **Perhaps the encounter is outwardly sordid and unattractive. But the Presence of God is brought about on earth there, and Christ is there, and God is in communion with man.**

This is what we are talking about when we speak the will Of God." Not only fulfilling precepts, and being holy, but being instruments of mercy, and fastening ourselves and others to God in the bonds of chesed.

Questions

1. What touched you most in this essay?
2. What new or deeper understanding did you receive from this essay?
3. By loving without classification, is it possible to realize who/what you really are?
4. How would you describe Chesed in your own words / experiences?
5. What are the obstacles to being a chasid as Merton describes it?
6. How are the chasid and the sinner so similar?