

Baccalaureate Mass
May 17, 2012
St. Ignatius Church

This afternoon's liturgy celebrates in ritual a rite of passage. It marks your leaving the halls of learning for the next leg of your journey. Today's Gospel story speaks about a journey; it may speak to you. The journey in the story is from Jericho to Jerusalem. Today, your final destination may not be quite so clear, but you are leaving here for somewhere else. The Gospel story is not really about traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem; it is about life's journey and how we choose to walk the path marked out for us.

In the Gospel Jesus tells this story in answer to the question, "who is my neighbor?" Jesus concludes his story with another question, "who proved himself a neighbor?" For Jesus, "neighbor" is not about closeness – geographical, ethnic, cultural, religious, whatever. "Neighbor" is not necessarily the person next door, the other African American, the other USF alum, the other Catholic, the other person from my town. For Jesus, the issue is not about accurately defining "neighbor;" it is about being neighbor. To really understand the story, we must realize that the antipathy between Samaritans and Jews was more intense and bitter than any ethnic or religious animosity of our times. The Samaritan not only crossed the road, he overcame centuries of hatred and bigotry when he reached out to dress the wounds of that half-dead Jew and thereby proved himself to be a neighbor.

Neighbor, for Jesus, is about how and who we chose to be in the world. In the story "the one who took pity" is the neighbor. Neighbor is about what we do, not where we are located. To "do neighbor" is to recognize those deep-seated feelings of compassion for the pain and suffering of another for what they are – a graced invitation from God. When Jesus tells his listeners, "go and do the same," he is telling us to go out of our way to heal the wounded, broken, neglected individuals pushed off to the side of the road. Jesus is telling us to shape our lives by those graced impulses of benevolence and compassion, not the darker drives of self-aggrandizement, class consciousness, envy, greed, gender phobia, race bias, or historic and religious antipathies. To succumb to those base instincts is, in the metaphor of the first reading, to waste your life on what cannot satisfy. It is the equivalent of trying to nourish your spirit with junk food that only fills you up but does not nourish your soul.

There is a scene from Thornton Wilder's play, "Our Town" that suggests the rationale for Jesus's telling us this story. The setting is a 19th century, American small town. A father says to his teenage son, "Well, George, while I was in my office today I heard a funny sound. What do you think it was? It was your mother chopping wood. There you see your mother – getting up early; cooking meals all day long; washing and ironing; and still she has to go out in the back yard and chop wood. I suppose she just got tired asking you. And you eat her meals, and put on the

clothes she keeps nice for you, and you run off and play baseball – like she’s some kind of hired girl we keep around the house but don’t like very much. [after a long pause], *I knew all I had to do was call your attention to it.*” Parenthetically, I suggest that today is a lovely moment for you graduates to pay attention to your parents and family and all that they have done for you.

In retelling the story of the Good Samaritan year after year, we recall and celebrate what Jesus “calls our attention to” by word and example: that we are meant to care for each other and this world God has given us, with a special concern for the weak and the vulnerable, who are often pushed to the edge of our consciousness.

Jesus is our teacher who gives us his life and nourishes us with his body and blood at this table; Jesus listens to our prayers and forgives our sins. Jesus is our servant, our savior and our judge. Elsewhere in the Gospel Jesus reminds us that he remains among us in the hungry, the naked, the thirsty, the immigrant, the imprisoned. How we treat them is the only accurate gauge of our love for God and our commitment to Gospel values. The God of Jesus, the God who is our “good news” does not want our guilty feelings; God wants us to put our love into action. Jesus became flesh and dwelt amongst us to “call our attention” to this simple truth.

So let us leave here today resolved to keep our minds and hearts open to the weak and the broken-hearted wherever our life’s journey may take us. Let us prove by living grateful and generous lives that in Jesus, God has indeed succeeded in doing all that God possibly could to “call our attention” to what really matters on our journey from Jericho to Jerusalem.