

Good Samaritan? Or Good PR?

By Josette Keelor

We've all seen those YouTube videos people post of themselves helping someone or saving an animal.

It isn't enough for them to just guide a family of ducks across the street or carry a stranded baby horse across a bridge for the pure pleasure of helping one of God's creatures. First they set up their phones to capture their good deeds, and then post their videos online for all the world to tell them how great they are.

These videos are cute, and I'll admit watching them gives me the warm and fuzzies. And one could argue these videos spread joy to others. People love stories of Good Samaritans. They remind us that it doesn't have to take heroics to be a hero to someone. It only takes effort.

But I think the difference here is who is telling the story. Are we praising some other person who did something heroic? Or are we praising ourselves?

These are the questions today's Gospel reading asks us. These are the situations Jesus cautions us to avoid.

Maybe you've seen the comments below such videos, praising the rescuer as a model human being, a standout among so many others who may have just kept on walking without helping, or even declaring it a sign that "there is still some good in this world."

I'm not saying what they did isn't worthy of praise. But would these actions be any less heroic if nobody else witnessed them? If people simply helped someone out and then they didn't tell anyone about it, couldn't the good feelings that come from doing a good deed be reward enough?

Imagine how different the parable of the Good Samaritan would be if instead of being recounted by Jesus, it was instead told by the Samaritan himself. Imagine instead that after saving the man he found beaten and robbed along the side of a road, the Samaritan had then gone into town and started telling everyone how he had helped this man whom no one else had been willing to help.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I don't have any money," he might say. "I gave all my cash to a hotel manager to make sure this guy I found along the side of the road had a place to stay. Yeah, he was in pretty rough shape, so I paid for his food and made sure a doctor will visit him. No, no, it was nothing. I was happy to do it. But I'm a little low on cash now, I hope you understand."

The story of the Good Samaritan, as told by the Samaritan, isn't quite the same, is it?

Because telling everyone what he did takes away from the act itself. It makes the act far less selfless when we start seeking glory for ourselves through recounting our sacrifices.

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled," Jesus tells us. "And all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Reading today's Gospel, I wasn't sure at first that I could relate. The people described in this Gospel sound awfully selfish, right?

They place all their burdens on others, they glean attention for themselves at every chance, and they try to tell everyone else what to do. Yeah, I know people like this, but that isn't me. Is it?

But I looked more closely at each of these statements, and that's when I started to see how I do these things too.

Like placing burdens onto others.

We do this all the time and don't even realize it, but that's because such burdens are not always literal. They can be emotional burdens. Or they can be theoretical.

We do this whenever we blame anyone else for what's going wrong in our lives, or in theirs. When we accuse them of not taking things seriously or of acting in ways we see as being inappropriate. When we wonder why they can't just act the way we want them to, or think the way we do. In all these ways, we're either giving them a greater burden to carry or we're leaving them to carry their burdens alone.

We might do this because it makes ourselves look more virtuous by highlighting their deficiencies.

We might not do this on purpose. We might not even realize that's what we're doing. But by removing ourselves from a situation in which we might help them—by raising our hands and telling someone we're frustrated with, "That's it, I'm done, you're on your own," what we're saying is, "I'm not going to help you carry this burden anymore."

Some situations we can't help with, and that's fine. The Serenity Prayer would remind us that we have to be willing to accept the things we cannot change. We cannot change the choices other people make. We cannot change whether they listen to us. But we can change the choices we make and whether we're forcing a burden onto someone else.

I think what today's reading suggests on this matter is that we consider our options in a situation before deciding we're not going to help someone. Are we choosing not to help because we know our helping the other person will only hurt them or keep them from helping themselves? Are we choosing not to help them because we're physically or emotionally incapable? Or are we refusing aid because we just don't feel like doing it and would rather do something else?

It's our choice to make. But we should consider what God would ask of us. And we should also consider what a relief it would be for someone to help us when we're overwhelmed by a heavy burden that's hard for us to bear.