

Homily for July 11, 2010 (15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C)
Deuteronomy 30:10-14; Psalm 19; Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 10:25-37
St. Joseph Parish, Saginaw, Michigan

It was on Easter Sunday 2009 that Brendan Marrocco's life changed forever. Private Marrocco, a gung-ho 22-year old serving in the U.S. Army, was on patrol in northern Iraq when a roadside bomb exploded under the vehicle he was driving. The blast blew off all of his arms and legs. Some of the shrapnel cut through his carotid artery. By the time he reached the emergency room, he had lost eighty percent of his blood. Few thought that he would make it.

Miraculously, however, Brendan Marrocco managed to survive. He became the first veteran of our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to live after losing all four of his limbs in combat. Fifteen months and fourteen surgeries later, he has made a remarkable recovery. His willingness to push himself through therapy to the point of exhaustion and his good humor have won him all kinds of admirers and have helped him to learn how to use four prosthetic devices. He is now considered a prime candidate for a rare double arm transplant.

But as amazing as his dedication and effort have been, Brendan Marrocco would never have made it without the support of dozens and dozens of people—everyone from an army of doctors, nurses and physical therapists to famous athletes. Perhaps the most important of these people is Brendan's brother, Michael, who left a well-paying job with Citigroup and moved to Washington to be at his brother's side. In exchange for his presence and assistance, U.S. Army provides him with room and board and \$64 a day for his living expenses.

Their mother didn't think that the more reserved Michael, whom she said wasn't a caregiver by nature, would be able to handle a job as demanding as helping a quadruple amputee. But he has. When asked why he chose to quit a great career to do a job that others could certainly do, he said simply, "It needed to be done, and I was best prepared to do it." For his brother Brendan, Michael Marrocco is the Good Samaritan.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus gives us a timeless parable that tells us what it really means to be "neighbor" to one another and gives us a flesh-and-blood definition of love. In the process, he also turns some conventional ideas of what it means to be righteous on their heads.

When challenged by "a scholar of the law" to tell him what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus quoted to him two provisions of the law. The first was a portion of the *Shema Israel*, the first of all of the commandments, from the Book of Deuteronomy (read Deut. 6:4-8). The second came from another part of the Torah, Leviticus 19:18, one of a long list of laws governing the people of Israel in

their care for themselves and in their relationships with each other, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Because he wanted to test Jesus further and to prove his own (self-) righteousness, the legal scholar asked him to define what it meant to be a neighbor. It was then that Jesus demonstrated that he not only knew what the law was but also understood what the law really meant. At the heart of the covenant between God and his people was the simplest commandment to remember and one of the hardest to follow: *love*.

In Psalm 19, we are reminded that God's words are "spirit and life;" and God's laws are described as perfect, trustworthy, right, clear, pure, true, precious and sweeter than syrup or honey. Aren't these also various facets of love??

Of course, it is easy to love in the abstract. As Dostoevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." Few things would be harsher or more dreadful than finding the victim of a robbery on the side of the street horribly beaten, stripped naked, and left for dead. But that's exactly what the three men in the parable found as they traveled on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

The priest and Levite—two reputed "experts" on the law—"passed by on the opposite side" of the road. Their motivations aren't explained in this gospel passage. However, some Bible scholars have speculated that perhaps they were trying to avoid risking ritual impurity by touching an apparently dead body. Others have suggested more practical reason: to avoid a possible ambush and being victimized themselves. Whatever may have been going through their minds, and no matter how much it may have made sense from a legal or practical point of view, they chose not to get involved. They decided it was none of their business.

By contrast, the Samaritan—who would have been considered a "half-breed" and unorthodox or even a heretic by the priest and Levite—made it his business to help some one in need; and he did more than call 911! "Moved with compassion," he rendered first aid to the victim, took him to an inn, helped him some more, and then left him in the care of others with a promise to cover the entire bill. Would Medicare, your insurance company or your HMO do that?

As Moses taught the people of Israel in his final sermon to them, following God's word and law aren't too difficult to grasp. "No," he admonished them, "it is already something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out." God later underscored that message by sending his Son: the living embodiment of his love and as St. Paul describes in our second reading "the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation."

As followers of Jesus, our first commandment is to love. As the example of Michael Marrocco reminds us, it simply needs to be done; and through the saving grace of the cross and our baptism, we can be the ones best prepared to do it. +