

Reading of the Good Samaritan: Luke 10: 25-37

We've been focusing our attention on the various sources of wisdom and lately we've been thinking about the Rotary Four Way Test, the four questions or standards Rotarians use to discern the appropriateness of a particular action. Today, I would like for us to consider the fourth test: Is it beneficial to all concerned?

Some years ago, I participated in a pastoral exchange, where another minister came to speak at the meeting I was pastoring and I went to speak at his meeting. He had sent directions, which I hadn't bothered to study until I neared the general vicinity of the meetinghouse in northern Indiana. So I didn't notice until it was too late that the directions were written with the assumption I knew the names of the people in that community. He told me to turn left at the Smith's barn, then proceed to the Johnson's house, turn right and keep going until I arrived at the meetinghouse.

He hadn't taken into account my ignorance of the local people. I was a half hour late and rather upset at the pastor, whom I referred to as an *idiot*, as in, "What kind of idiot would write instructions like these?"

Joan said, “You shouldn’t say someone is an idiot.” So I apologized to her, and just thought it to myself without saying it out loud.

But this week I learned the original definition of the word *idiot*, which suggests it was the right word all along. Now I’m going to sound a bit like the father on *My Big, Fat Greek Wedding*, but the word *idiot* comes from the Greek word *idiōtēs*, which means “private person.” Used in this sense, it is a person who has forgotten he or she is also a “public person,” a person in relationship to others. It is one who falsely assumes everyone shares the same frame of reference, who thinks others see the world exactly as he does, and consequently fails to have empathy for others, because he can only view the world through his own eyes. Thus, an idiot is someone who has no ethical imagination, is someone who simply can’t understand his duty to another, because he is a “private” person who has forgotten his public role. He routinely fails to ask, “Is it beneficial to all concerned?”

Now let us return to the story of the Good Samaritan. Who do we see in that story? Who is the cast? We see a traveler, we see robbers who attacked the traveler and left him for dead. We see two people who kept on walking. More than that, they passed by on the other side of the

road. People who were so concerned with their private roles they forgot their public roles. We'll call them idiots.

We see a Samaritan who everyone thought was an idiot, because the Samaritans were so insistent their experience of God was the only valid one. They were private people with their private religion, who worshipped their private God on their private mountain. So no one expected the Samaritan to remember his public role, or understand his duty to others. But he did. He turned out to be the anti-idiot, a true neighbor, a real friend, because he saw the traveler and went to him and had compassion, while the two persons most likely to understand and appreciate their public role, averted their gaze and hurried past.

A story: Remember when Butler played Duke for the NCAA championship? Great game. Great coach. Great players. One of the Butler players is a young man named Shawn Vanzant. Four years ago, Shawn Vanzant had nowhere to live. His mother was dead. His father was in prison. He had an older brother who looked out for him, but the older brother was in trouble with the law and at risk of imprisonment.

Shawn's basketball coach at the time approached a woman named Lisa Litton, who was the mother of one of Shawn's teammates. The coach asked Lisa Litton, "Can you take him in for awhile? It'll just be temporary."

She had cancer at the time, and also suffered from lupus. She and her husband also had three children of their own still living at home, but Lisa Litton said, “Sure, we can do that.”

That was four years ago and it’s now become his home and the Litton’s have become his family. When asked why she agreed to help Shawn Vanzant, Litton says she can remember what it felt like to be alone. When she was six years old, her mother abandoned her and her siblings, and they never saw or heard from her again. So she remembered, and took the teenager into her family. (This story was reported in the May 4, 2010 edition of *The Christian Century*, on page 8, in the column *Century Marks*.)

Is it beneficial to all concerned? What a wonderful question! Reminding us not to be idiots, not to be people so caught up in our private lives, we forget our public roles, forsaking our responsibility to love and care for others who lie hurting along the road.