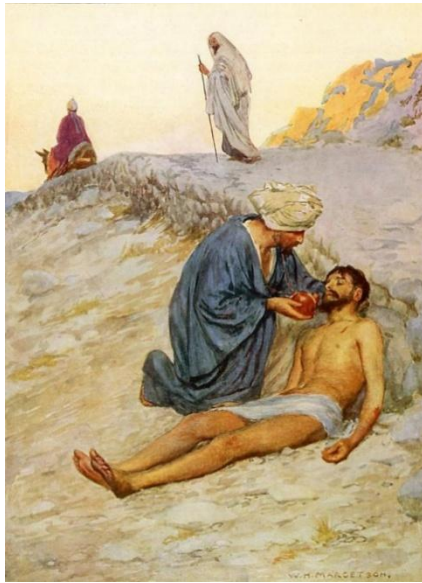


## Homily – July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025 – 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time



There is a spirituality for the first half of our lives and a spirituality for the second half of our lives. First half of life spirituality and second half of life spirituality are very different from each other, but both are necessary. Unfortunately, most of us Catholics—including us priests—continue to operate out of a first half of life spirituality even when it is no longer serving us well. We just keep trying the same old things over and over again hoping for a better or different result. We keep putting new wine in old wineskins, to use an expression of Jesus, and wonder why those old wineskins burst.

As one author put it, in the first half of life we fight the devil; in the second half of life we fight God. When you fight the devil in the first half of life, you're clear about who the enemy is, who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. In some heroic and romanticized way, we believe that if we can flex the muscles of our willpower, we will be triumphant over anything we see as a temptation. Fighting the devil gives our ego a sense of achievement, accomplishment, of victory over the enemy. In the first half of life we live by the rules, and the rules kept us within the boxing ring. Healthy spirituality has to start off in a box, in a world of containment. Hopefully your parents gave you that containment when you were a child. There was a set time for bedtime, especially on school nights. There were curfews later on. They taught you right from wrong. They brought you

to church and taught you your first prayers. It was all good and absolutely necessary at that stage of your life. We all need structure, rules, discipline, security, and boundaries to get us going in life. If those are not there, and we are raised in a free-for-all environment where everything goes, we tend to be ungrounded when a crisis hits. At age 35 or 40, those raised without any containment, start looking for it. These are the people who, if they haven't rejected religion totally, go in the opposite direction. They embrace a fundamentalist religion where everything is black and white, and some authority figure, usually a pastor, gives them the security they were seeking, even if it's a false security. If we don't move past first half of life spirituality, we just keep shoring up the laws, trying harder and harder to fulfil them, and never getting a sense that we are worthy in the eyes of God.

The first half of life is about *willfulness*, flexing the muscles of the will, and feeling some satisfaction that we're fighting the devil and winning. In that battle we hope to win but are never sure we've done enough to get God to love us. The second half of life is not about fighting the devil and hoping to win but fighting God knowing that we will lose. Losing, even losing to God, is almost too humbling for our ego. That's why most of us will retreat back into being loyal soldiers, falling back into the world of rules, remaining in the first half and trying to put new wine in old wineskins.

This is the world of the lawyer in today's gospel. He has come with an agenda. In fact, I think he approached Jesus with two agendas. The opening line was, "**A lawyer stood up to test Jesus.**" His first agenda is to show, by way of a test, that he

is so much smarter than Jesus. He knows the law inside out. When he asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus—knowing he’s dealing with a lawyer—asks the man, **“What is written in the Law?”** The lawyer summarizes the many laws of the Jewish faith, much in the way Jesus himself would summarize it, by saying, “We ought to love God with all we are and our neighbour as ourself” to which Jesus praises him. Then Jesus adds the part, “Now go and live it.” It’s easy to quote the Law, but it’s hard to live it.

Here comes the lawyer’s second agenda. **But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”** In other words, if the Law requires that I have to love my neighbour, the Law must also contain no obligation on my part towards someone who is not my neighbour. Jesus, tell me who’s in and who’s out, so that I don’t waste a lot of love on people for whom I won’t get credit for in the end. Who’s in, who’s out? Who’s worthy to receive communion, who’s not? Who does God love, who does God not love? These are all legalistic questions that serve our egos, but do not help us grow in truth. They keep us in our self-constructed boxes where we can feel superior to others, to those blacks, those Hispanics, those Protestants, those alcoholics, those gay people, those lazy street people, whatever.

What moves us out of first half of life spirituality into second half of life spirituality is some destabilization of the ego. Something has to fall apart. Great tragedy or great love seem to be the only two things that can transform us. The imperial ego may be destabilized by the birth of a handicapped child, a marriage that falls apart, a career that didn’t work, a spouse that dies way too young. These aren’t

supposed to happen. When we realize there are no laws that can justify or make sense of what is before us and trying harder and harder to fix it isn't making one bit of difference, then—and only then—do we move to the level of surrender. That's the second half of life spirituality. We are no longer fighting the devil; we are fighting God. We don't hope to win; we hope to lose, to surrender, and fall into the loving arms of God.

The lawyer, in today's gospel, is a law-abiding Jew. He's memorized and summarized the Law to a tee, but he has never met God, and he's probably never met tragedy. He's spent his life running from the devil, but he has never been taught how to walk with the Lord.

He was so sure about who was in and who was out, who was a neighbour and who wasn't. He was so sure he was going to be praised and justified by Jesus. He wanted his world of rules to be shored up and reinforced by Jesus, but he didn't get that. Instead he got Jesus who tells him a story about an outsider, someone outside the Law, outside the box, a Samaritan who is actually good! The priest and Levite are probably on their way to a religious ceremony and so cannot, by Law, risk getting ritually contaminated by touching a dead person or touching blood, so they move past the injured man in the ditch. Their adherence and loyalty to the Law prevent them from showing compassion. The Samaritan, despised by "real" Jews, sees past categories, sees past religion, and sees the deeper truth--a fellow human being in need. He sees, as St. Paul says in that second reading, ***"the image of the invisible God."*** He doesn't have to go to a theologian to bring the law to him from the heavens, nor does he have to hire a sailor who will bring it to him

from the other side of the sea. He just has to believe that doing the right thing is near to him; it's in his mouth and in his heart.

In ancient times, Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the Law, from God. Moses ends up smashing the tablets; the Law is no more. He goes up the mountain a second time, and only after a face-to-face encounter with God does he receive a second set of tablets, which changes everything. Our first understanding of the Law must fail us and disappoint us. Only after breaking the first tablets of the Law is Moses a real leader and prophet. Only after does he see God's glory (Ex. 33:18 f), and only afterward does his face shine (Ex. 34:29). It might just be the difference between the two halves of life.

The Samaritan saw the face of God in the wounded man in the ditch and responded. The lawyer, like the priest and the Levite in the parable, saw only the Law, and kept on walking. One is good; the others only look good.

~Fr. Phil