

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
St. Mary's, Richmond
Fr. Michael Renninger

Philadelphia is a city of neighborhoods.

South Philly has the tightest neighborhoods of all. The Irish settled at Second Street. The Italians moved into Shunk Street, the Germans built their parish near Tasker Street.

Since they were almost all Catholics, you might think that everyone in South Philly got along. Wrong! I remember talking to Rosie Gangemi, a woman who lived on the same block for 78 years. She told me the story of how frightened the Italians were when an Irish family tried to buy a house on their street. Her father had declared, "those filthy Irish will ruin the neighborhood! All they do is drink and fight!"

Bridget McInerny told a similar story – when a Sicilian family bought a house near the Irish church, several of the local Irish boys took it upon themselves to throw rocks through their windows. As Bridget explained, "we didn't want those greaseballs in our neighborhood, because we knew they would bring in the mob!"

This kind of division also existed in the local churches. Germans went to Saint Aloysius. Italians went to St. Rita's. Irish folks went to St. Gabriel's. One old Irish priest told me the story of going to confession as a kid with an Italian friend at the Italian parish. As he finished his confession, the priest told him to say the act of contrition. Half way through, the priest said, "Stop. That's the Irish act of contrition." At which point the priest got out of the confessional, told the Irish boy to go to his own parish, where "your filthy Irish sins can be forgiven."

I asked that retired priest, "How could Catholics treat each other that way?" And he said, "you don't understand. In your neighborhood, everyone basically looked the same, ate the same, talked the same. Your neighborhood was all that mattered. And the folks who were different? Well, they just didn't matter."

They just didn't matter.

That kind of thinking is not reserved to the old neighborhoods of South Philly. In today's Gospel, the hero of Jesus' story came from the 'wrong neighborhood.' The hero was a Samaritan. Samaria was located just north of ancient Israel. And while Israelites and Samaritans had many things in common, there was a great division between them. They worshipped differently. They believed differently. They lived differently. A 'good' Israelite was taught, from an early age, to look with disdain on any Samaritan, and vice versa. In the eyes of a 'good' Israelite, Samaritans just didn't matter....

Well, at least that is what the average person thought. But in today's Gospel, we find that God wants to challenge that attitude.

We've all heard the story of the "Good Samaritan" before. In fact, many states have laws called "Good Samaritan" laws. In modern English, a "good Samaritan" is anyone who stops to help a person in need.

But, we've heard the term "Good Samaritan" so often that we can fail to understand just how shocking Jesus' story would have been to his Jewish listeners. Because, the point was this – in their minds, there could be NO SUCH THING as a "*good Samaritan*." In their minds, every Samaritan was, by definition, a *bad Samaritan*. Samaritans were 'different.' Samaritans were 'not from here, not from our neighborhood, not part of the Chosen People.' Yet, Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of his parable! The priest and the Levite walked by the suffering man on the road, but it was a Samaritan – someone who *does not matter!* – who acts in a Godly way, and does the Godly thing.

In telling the story this way, Jesus makes it clear – his mission, and his ministry, are not limited to a select few, or for a Chosen People. In the Kingdom and Heaven, EVERYONE matters, everyone can do the Godly thing. This shocked Jesus' first followers, and this message continues to shock Jesus' followers in the 21st century.

The message is clear – everyone matters. Foreigners, strangers, people NOT LIKE US, belong to God's reign. And we have a responsibility to include them, as Jesus did.

The Gospel tells us that Samaritans – that is, foreigners, strangers, are part of the kingdom. That message has the power to shake up those who view contemporary foreigners or strangers with disdain, or disapproval.

But we cannot stop there. In ancient Israel, God's people often looked with disdain on ANYONE who was 'different.' But Christ rejects that way of thinking. So the Gospel also has the power to shake up those who, for instance, think that unborn children simply don't matter.

People of faith cannot dismiss any one, or any group. We do not have the luxury of walking by them on the other side of the road. I can't look at someone and say "they don't matter." Because – in God's eyes, they *do*.

So, as Christians, we must wrestle with this message.

Everyone matters: divorced folks matter, handicapped children matter, very elderly folks matter. They all matter.

Everyone matters: people of every race and tongue; people of every educational background, people of every sexual orientation. They all matter.

Everyone matters: the Mexican guys who plant the shrubs at your office, the Somali refugees who live in a group home near you, the families in the East End who struggle to make ends meet. They all matter.

Everyone matters: that family member who keeps succumbing to addiction; that neighbor who battles depression; that friend who left the church in an angry way.

Everyone matters: folks with strong faith, folks with struggling faith, folks who say they have no faith.

Everyone matters: the soccer players who are the picture of health, the aging parent whose body is frail.

Everyone matters: the people in Afghanistan who live with uncertainty, the people on the Gulf Coast who live with an oil spill, the people in China who do not know the freedom which we take for granted.

Everyone matters. We have a responsibility to them in Christ's name.

This is not an easy version of Christianity. But the children who are being baptized today are not being welcomed into an easy world. We face strong challenges today – and these children will need strong faith to deal with those challenges. But we are convinced that these children will find JOY in life, if they know, first of all, that *they* matter. In the eyes of God, *they* are precious and beloved.

And, if these children come to know that truth, then they can become faithful followers of Jesus, living their lives with the conviction that everyone they meet matters *too* in God's eyes.

Has anyone told you recently that YOU don't matter? *It's a lie!* Just look at the crucifix...where Jesus says to you, "*this* is how much you matter. *This* is how much I love you. *This* is how much I am willing to *give*, so that you can *live*...forever."