

June 22 2014 reflection "Revisiting the Good Samaritan" (Hugh Kerr)

I'm a Streamkeeper. So, during the fall and early winter I count salmon in creeks. On one cold rainy Christmas Day, after our big turkey dinner, I went out to count salmon. My stream starts under a bridge.

On this day I found a man there. I sat down with him and we began to talk.

I asked him how he felt about the weather ? He said he was used to it, having spent a lot of time outdoors as a kid. What did he do with his time ? He talked to the birds, and wrote rap poetry for them, which he demonstrated very well, at some length. How did he come to be under bridge ?

He told me he had studied music with a person (whom he named) at University of Victoria. He went on to tell me that he used to be married, and he told me his wife's name. After some time I satisfied myself that he felt OK despite his circumstances, so I gave him \$20 and went home.

At home I looked up name of music prof, and using Google and Canada 411 I was able to phone his wife. She told me they had lived together for 7-8 years, but then he had developed schizophrenia. Living with him became impossible, because his personality changed. Finally he left, and she had lost contact.

This story reminds me of what Elizabeth often tells me: things happen, and often they are not a person's fault. Our life could change in a moment or over a short period, through an accident, a disease or some other mishap. We could end up with Alzheimer's, or become a paraplegic, or just be left old and alone.

There are many people who need help. Christ often talked about the poor. Christ said, as quoted by 3 out of the 4 gospels, that the poor will always be with us. "Poor" can have many definitions – people with all sorts of disadvantages. And not just in Canada.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, which Muriel read, we hear of a man beaten and robbed, left half dead. Neither a passing priest, nor a Levite who came by, both of them Jews like the injured man, were willing to help him. But a Samaritan came by and helped. At that time Samaritans were hated by Jews because they had desecrated a temple. So the fact that a Samaritan would help a Jew would have had a great impact on Christ's listeners.

We know this parable well. It broadens our ideas of what a neighbour is. It represents what many of us feel is a superior characteristic of Christians. We help others. In some ways I might feel that I was like the Good Samaritan when I spoke with the man under the bridge. But I did not solve any of his real problems. My help was very short term. I was not willing to bring him home, even for overnight, let alone to live with us. Imagine Elizabeth's reaction to: "Hi honey, I'm home. Look who I brought home for dinner. And guess what ? He's going to live with us !" Similarly the former partner of the man under the bridge was not willing to live with him once he developed schizophrenia, despite having loved him for many years. He needs support, beyond what I or his former partner were willing to supply. Why should anyone be a Good Samaritan, especially for longer terms ?

Partly because we follow the Bible, and this parable illustrates how we should behave.

But there are a variety of reasons why people give support for various causes.

One reason why some people give is to lower their taxes. As we know, any money given to charity beyond an annual 200, is not fully taxed: you get a tax credit of 43 %. So for any \$100 donated to M&S, it costs you only \$57. You might feel good about reducing tax money which goes to ...pay senators, for example. And note that M&S gets the full \$100, almost doubling your \$57 donation.

A second reason why people give to charity is to show how generous they are. Some hospital wings or hospital rooms with expensive equipment, or university programs, like the Rotman School of Business, have the names of donors on them. Most of us know about the Bill Gates Foundation, which gives millions of dollars for a wide range of projects.

It's certainly better to have such donations than not. But the Good Samaritan did not require this. He was anonymous. He just helped, with no thought of reward.

Many people give anonymously. We all give anonymously here to our local church- to support the minister, the staff, the utilities, the building upkeep, etc. We believe in the importance of the church, and we provide support.

Another reason for giving - and this can be an important aspect- is that helping others makes US feel good ourselves. How did the Good Samaritan feel after he helped the man ? I'm guessing he felt pretty good. He may well have saved the life of the man who had been beaten. When you help someone, you feel good, even if no one else knows. It's a sort of therapy.

But in both my story and what most of us remember of the Good Samaritan sporable the help was short-lived. We helped out and moved on. M&S money which goes to disasters like the typhoon in the Philippines, or the earthquake victims in Haiti, also is short term. Medical help, food, shelter and other needs are rushed in. But support decreases over time. Nevertheless we feel like we are acting like a good neighbour when we support such efforts, and we should.

With the story of the Good Samaritan, the teaching which most of us take away is the "good neighbour" aspect. Christ was pointing out that everyone you meet, and in fact everyone in the world, is a neighbour. If they need help, we should give it.

And that is the main reason why I give M&S: to help others both in Canada and elsewhere.

But it's important to note the last part of the Good Samaritan story. What did the Good Samaritan do as he was leaving ? He said to the innkeeper: "Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return."

I must admit that when I started to plan this reflection, I did not remember that. It's not what most of us remember about the story of the Good Samaritan. But it in fact he provided a more longterm commitment than we notice at first. "Whatever you spend..., I will repay you !" Wow ! The Samaritan was essentially hiring the innkeeper to help the beaten man.

One complaint that people give about charities like M&S is that they do not really know where their money is going, unlike the Good Samaritan. Last Christmas M&S came out with a booklet listing projects to which one could designate support. This was called "Gifts with Vision". 27 projects are listed in this booklet. They include camps for Canadian kids who otherwise could not afford it, helping people to address gang violence in El Salvador, caring for kids in Kenya, funding school books in Haiti, helping to dig a well, etc. It's a challenging list, especially at Christmas when we are reminded just how lucky, and how rich, we are compared to most of the world. I'll leave this booklet at the back of the church.

But most of the projects supported by M&S are ongoing projects which need ongoing support from dedicated professionals. We ourselves do not have the professional, or practical or language skills to help many of the people who need it. And there are other things we want to do with our lives.

M&S dollars support workers abroad who are much more dedicated than I am, and who work in places for long periods of time. Some write letters to describe their work: some are online at the United Church website. One of the letters online is from a woman in Colombia, who talks of the difficulties Colombians are having reaching peaceful solutions to the long term battles between the government and revolutionaries. Our representatives need to be there, in place, to understand what really is going on, and how they can help.

And by the way, M&S has an excellent record of minimizing administrative costs. For example, no M&S dollars go to pensions or health insurance of United Church personnel in Canada. The donated M&S money really does go to directly help others.

What are the programs which M&S supports ? We read about one each week. There is a long list of M&S projects, some of which are described at the United Church website online. This book, "Mandate", also lists all the projects. There are pages of them. I'll also leave this at the back.

To be more effective, M&S often partners with organizations in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia to respond to many issues, including food insecurity, climate change, people affected by HIV and AIDS, lack of access to clean water, conflict resolution, nurturing Christian organizations, and working to eradicate poverty. One of the organizations is ACT, Action by Churches Together, which is a global coalition of more than 130 church and church-related organizations.

In Canada M&S supports a lot of projects and ministries across the country. They include hospital and jail chaplaincies, campus ministries, summer camps, drop in centres for seniors and others, and programs for people in poverty.

Yesterday was National Aboriginal Day in Canada. The normal M&S reading for to-day is about what is called the Longhouse Council of Native Ministry in East Vancouver. The Longhouse has Sunday worship, sharing circles, 12 step addiction programs and other programs for helping native people. It is partly supported by M&S.

First United Church in Vancouver also is partly supported by M&S. It's easy to think that, in a rich country like Canada, places like First United or the Longhouse are not needed; that the homeless in Vancouver and indeed in Squamish are just lazy. I spoke to someone at Helping Hands recently and asked how many of the people who go there have addictions or have mental problems. Her estimate was 85%...85% ! Someone at First United estimated 90%, without having heard the Helping Hands estimate. How do we help such people ? It's very difficult to break addictions, or cope with mental illness.

I had a coworker in Waterloo with a husband who was a professor and three sons - a good family. Her oldest son became an addict to heroin after being introduced to it by my coworker's sister- his aunt ! It has spoiled his life. He cannot hold a job, because he cannot focus. His brain no longer works the same way. In his case he is lucky enough that his family is willing to support him to live in his own small apartment. Others are not so "lucky", if you can call his situation "lucky".

You can volunteer to help at First United, for example to hand out tea and sandwiches in midafternoon. As you know there are many street people on Hastings where First United is. First United typically feeds about 200 people at each of breakfast and lunch, and 60 people sleep there. About 30 come to tea time. They are all very polite when handed a donated cookie or a muffin. Then they sit at a small table to eat and drink. Most of them sit alone. Many are addicted. They do not look happy. Most do not socialize very much, if at all. It's a lonely life. They may be depressed or have other mental illnesses. Some of them talk to themselves. They may have served time in jail and find it hard to get a job. They may have had abusive parents, and left home and dropped out of school. One might be a veteran with PTSD and no partner for support. His or her parents may be unable to cope with this problem child. Imagine how difficult it might be for the clients at First United to face each morning waking in a shelter or on the street.

Put yourself in their place, with no place to live, and very little money. Go to Hastings St with no money and only the clothes on your back. Join them on the sidewalk. Imagine you cannot find permanent work, maybe you can occasionally find part-time minimum wage jobs. Or perhaps you are too messed up to hold a job. You may have no real friends. You have worn out your welcome with family and friends. Where will you spend the night? Where will you eat? What is your self esteem like? How can you change your life? First United not only provides shelter and food, but also has people who try to give some guidance about how to improve lives.

Once you are at the bottom, it's hard to get up. This is also true for the poorly educated or oppressed or poor or street kids in other countries.

What can we do here at Squamish United? Individually it is hard for anyone to do much. People here do give things like used clothes, gloves, toques and soap to First United. That is great, and very appreciated. We cannot all afford to give more money.

For those who can, I certainly am not asking you to divert your givings from this church to M&S. But consider this. Suppose you gave \$2 more per week. – equivalent to one cup of coffee at the Sunflower Café or Starbucks. That \$2 per week would add up to about \$100 per year. If you already are giving \$200 to charity, your \$100 would only cost you \$57. Once you do that, when you listen to the next "Minute for Mission", you can say to yourself "That's my money. That's what I did."

Think about it. If everyone here did the same, say 30 people per week, then our M&S givings would increase by about \$3000 over the year. If you are on a monthly PAR giving, then consider giving an extra \$10 per month. Or even better, consider \$5 per week in an envelope or \$25 per month on PAR.

If you are on PAR, it's easy to go home and forget this reflection. Or if you use envelopes, you might forget about M&S next week or next month, especially with a long weekend coming up. So I want you to take home a reminder. Take the sticky note in your bulletin. Write on it a small extra sum you want to give to M&S. Then stick it into your wallet or purse. Next time you open your wallet, put it on your fridge. If you are on PAR the sticky will remind you to phone Jody and arrange to change your PAR givings. Or if you use envelopes it might remind you to put just a little more money in your envelope.

Any money you give will help M&S a lot.

And you will feel great about it. Thanks for listening.