In the environment that is now the USA, with all of the dividing issues currently on the table – this parable comes perhaps as Jesus’ compass to help us find our way out of our division and increasing segregation and separation on many levels.

I may disagree with you, but I don’t have to hate you.

I may disagree with you, but I don’t have to belittle you.

I may disagree with you, but I can still treat you with dignity. The Samaritan did.

So, let’s look at the parable.

The parables of Jesus are so much a part of our culture that people often refer to them without realizing they’re talking religion. Take the phrase “good Samaritan.” You’ll find it inmost large dictionaries, because it’s a part of our common speech. There’s even a Good Samaritan travel club though you don’t need to be a Christian to join. Most everyone knows what you mean if you speak of someone being a “good Samaritan,’ even though they may have no idea that the term has its origins in a story Jesus told.

Like many of Jesus’ parables, this one was born in the give and take of a discussion. A lawyer asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. A lawyer in first-century Israel was really a theologian, because the law of the Jewish people was that section of the Hebrew scriptures referred to as the Books of Moses, which are the first five books of the OT. To be a lawyer and to know the law therefore was to know the purpose and teachings of the Hebrew scriptures – especially the first five books. One obeyed the law in order to follow and please God rather than to stay out of the courts.

Jesus answered the lawyer’s question with a summary of the law in a commandment with two parts: love God with all your heart, soul mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. Simple and straightforward.

The lawyer saw immediately the rightness of Jesus’ answer, and he wanted a way out because he knew it was simple and straightforward, just not easy. Perhaps, like many of us, he wanted the law cut down to a manageable size, and he knew the key to doing so was to limit the definition of neighbor. We can love some people without too much effort, so it would be convenient if the commandment were to apply to only such persons. “But who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asked.

So, Jesus told the story we just heard. The poor man was beaten, robbed and left for dead. He lay there helpless. A priest came along but passed him by. Another church leader came along, maybe the organist or a lector or vestry, but he passed by also.

Then the Samaritan came by. And stopped. Jesus was speaking to a Jewish or predominantly Jewish audience and He knew full well how they felt about Samaritans. There were bad feelings between Jews and Samaritans that went back several centuries. Jews despised Samaritans for both ethnic and religious reasons. A Jew would go miles out of his way to avoid contact with Samaritans. And Samaritans willingly returned the favor.

Now this Samaritans was clearly a very good human being. When he saw the battered, dying man, he stopped to help. After giving first aid, he put the man on his donkey and carried the man to an inn where he further cared for him. Upon leaving the next day, he made provision for the wounded man to be cared for until he returned whereby, he would settle any further debt incurred. No wonder the term “good Samaritan” has found a place in our common speech!

It’s easy to see the point of Jesus’ story. No doubt the lawyer got it and was pained by it. Jesus wants us to realize the responsibility we have toward our fellow human beings, and to understand that we are neighbors to the whole human race. Crack open a white, brown, blue, pink or green egg and they’re all the same inside. We are too and that’s Jesus’ point.

Now allow me t approach the story from the backside as my colleague J. Ellsworth Kalas is so good at doing. What if we look for once at the man who was beaten instead of any of the other players in the story? How did he feel about being ignored by the priest and the church leader? How did he feel about being helped by a despised Samaritan?

Jesus doesn’t tell us the victim was a Jew, but there’s no doubt and it’s implied in the story. A Jew in trouble, ignored by his fellow Jews – who most easily fill the definition of “neighbor” – and was then helped by a Samaritan. How did the Jew feel about the experience?

Let us remember that we’re talking about someone who had never associated with a Samaritan and probably had never even spoken to one. Furthermore, he hoped it would remain that way. But now, in his hour of deepest need, a Samaritan, not a Jew stops to help and follows through helping as well. Imagine the victim overhearing the Samaritan the next morning as he makes financial arrangements for the man’s continued care.

How do you think he felt about this? Easy you say. He’s grateful to be alive. Maybe not. I have counseled enough people to know that some would “rather die” that to have to deal with X, Y or Z. They probably don’t mean it literally but it’s a pretty graphic way of describing the intensity of the feelings involved.

So maybe this Jewish man is whispering to God in prayer, “Thank you O God for sending me help. But couldn’t you send a nice Jewish man instead of a nice Samaritan?”

Riding the Q train into Brooklyn one Friday night, Muslim Hassan Askari noticed ten thugs hassling a young couple for replying ‘Happy Chanukah’ when greeted with ‘Merry Christmas’. Fearing for the woman’s safety, he pushed one thug away, and the gang pounced on the 5’ 7”, 140 lb. hero. This gave the two victims time to pull the subway’s emergency brake and summon help.

Askari received two black eyes and a sore nose for his efforts, but never went to a doctor because he worked two jobs and couldn’t afford medical care. Victim Walter Adler (who received a broken nose and required four stitches for a split lip) was shocked that “a random Muslim kid helped some Jewish kids, (and) that’s what’s positive about New York”.

Yes, that is fairly surprising and is just as unsuspected a source for help as the Samaritan in today’s reading.

Who might your good Samaritan be?

Perhaps a drug addict or a homeless person

Maybe a gay or lesbian or maybe even someone who claims a gender you don’t even understand

Possibly a Muslim of someone who came to the USA in a northbound caravan

Whoever your Good Samaritan may be, God has grace for us to both receive from others when we are in need and give to others when they are in need.

As Jesus said, “Go and do likewise!” Amen