

# The 'Audacity of Charity' from a Biblical Viewpoint

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The intent to speak about “the boldness of Charity” from a biblical perspective offers an “embarrassment of riches”. I think that we could easily spend a week telling the stories and drawing out the lessons which can be identified in each experience, in each parable, in each discourse. The very nature of charity in the Bible suggests a boldness and a momentum which thrusts us into new ways of thinking and acting for the future. In this presentation, I will limit myself to four basic stories and invite the question raised in each story to give direction to our reflections. We will acknowledge immediately that any of these stories could take all our time and their richness would not be exhausted. The four stories are: the Good Samaritan, the Rich Young Man who comes to Jesus, the Last Judgment, and the Woman who is a public sinner. In each of these stories, a question can be asked (and usually is asked) and alternative responses to the situations are offered as well as the bold one. Let us see what they have to teach us about the “boldness of charity” and a “new missionary momentum”.

## **I. The Good Samaritan: “Who is my neighbor?”**

This is one of the two most well-known parables in the New Testament. Jesus tells the parable in response to a specific question asked by a lawyer around the question of charity:

*But because [the lawyer] wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”. Jesus replied, “A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, ‘Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back’.*

*Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?". He answered, "The one who treated him with mercy". Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:29-37).*

Numerous elements in this story can be of interest to us as Christians, as we engage the central question: "Who is my neighbor?".

First of all, notice that the victim in the story is ignored by some who travel this route. This is an alternative response to the needs of the poor. The story makes it clear: the two priestly figures who come along this same road where the victim lays see him and pass by on the other side. There is no question of not knowing the troubles of the victim; there is an active effort to avoid him and to shun getting involved in his plight. We might place him among the disadvantaged who are most abandoned yet in evident need of attention and assistance. That certainly describes someone for whom Vincentians would have a particular attraction as we place our emphasis on the most neglected.

Secondly, we notice the complete care which the Samaritan provided – "time, talent, and treasure" as we sometimes say. He personally attends to the needs of the victim and does so over a period of time. Do not lose sight of how he invests himself: "he pours wine and oil over the cuts", then "he bandages the wounds", then he "lifts him onto his own animal", "brings him to an inn", and "cares for him". That is how he spends his night! When he is no longer able to continue that level of care directly, he arranges for the needs of the victim in another way: he seeks the help of the innkeeper and provides monetary support with the assurance that he will reimburse additional expenses in the future. The story makes the charity of the Samaritan evident from beginning to end, and it is not a modest charity. It is bold. It involves time and effort and planning and investment. One can imagine the joy and attention with which Jesus constructed this story and its details.

The care which we provide for the afflicted also has that total involvement. It is not simply the physical requirements of those who are poor which must be engaged but also the social and spiritual. Not all needs can be met by the Sister; sometimes others must be invited to help in the care of those most deprived. And the care must be provided over time and not according to one's own availability. The needs of the poor do not operate according to our own clocks and calendars.

Thirdly, note that Jesus changes the question of the lawyer by his story! After the lawyer has asked his question, and after Jesus has told the parable, Jesus asks the lawyer's question differently. Do you see the difference? It is really important to do so!

At the beginning, the lawyer asks Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?". At the end, Jesus asks the lawyer: "Who was neighbor to the robbers' victim?"

You see the difference. The question as first asked is from the position of power: "Who is neighbor to the influential person who is willing to be generous?". The question as posed by Jesus is: "Who is neighbor to the poor person who is in need of assistance?". They are profoundly different questions. The answer to Jesus' question is: whoever is able to provide for the needs of the poor – whatever their race, religion, or gender – is neighbor. Jesus has changed the question of the lawyer and thus deeply changed the response. And the lawyer would know this, as should we.

Our neighbor is not simply the person whom we want to serve, but the person who needs our assistance. The power does not rest with us, but with the one who is in need. The boldness of charity does not lie within my power to choose, but within the person who looks to me for assistance. André Dodin has a wonderful line in his book on *Vincent de Paul and Charity*. He says: "We do not choose the poor, it is they who choose us" (p. 31). That is what it means to be our "lords and master". They determine who and how we serve because it is their needs which summon us to action and which must be treated with respect and confidence.

At the end of the parable, Jesus returns to the opening question of the lawyer. For Jesus, the response to questions – particularly questions about charity – can never be theoretical. Listen to the way in which Jesus concludes their conversation:

*[Jesus asked] "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?". [The lawyer] answered, "The one who treated him with mercy". Jesus said to him, "Go and **do** likewise" (Lk 10:36-37).*

The response to the lawyer always involves "doing" and doing "with compassion". This is the means for attaining eternal life for the lawyer and for us. The parable of the Good Samaritan is the device which Jesus uses to emphasize this point for his hearers and for us on this day.

Our first story raises the question of who must be served with the boldness of charity and it points out to us some of the ways in which this ministry must be carried out. It opens for us a discussion which must be pursued in other lively questions and stories.

## **II. The Rich Young Man: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"**

Many people come to Jesus to ask him the question about eternal life and about the most important of the commandments. The lawyer in the story above of the "Good Samaritan" begins his dialogue with Jesus along these lines. The rich young man who approaches Jesus in his story raises the same issue.

*Now someone approached him and said, "Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?". He answered him, "Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments". He asked him, "Which ones?". And Jesus replied, "'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother'; and 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself'". The young man said to him, "All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?". Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me". When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mt. 19:16-24).*

The man wants to know "what *must I do to inherit eternal life?*". We, too, want to know the answer to this question, and so we listen. Jesus takes the question seriously and responds with an answer which might be expected of a pious rabbi. He basically says: "*Keep the commandments*". When the man answers that he has always done that, Jesus begins to take a particular interest in him. This is clearly a good man, and Jesus wants to give him the opportunity to be even better. Jesus wants this man to choose to follow him with boldness, but not without cost. I can see Jesus looking the man straight in the eye and telling him:

*"If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matt 19:21).*

Jesus goes right to the heart of the matter. He sees what could be holding this man back from allowing God to be the absolute center of his life. His possessions get in the way. Jesus invites him to relieve himself of these possessions, to give away his wealth for the benefit of the poor, and then to come follow him personally. He offers the man an opportunity to be a disciple! What a privilege! What an act of boldness!

But Jesus has identified exactly that which will cause the man difficulty. The story says it succinctly: "*When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions*" (Matt 19:22). The eagerness of the man to do what was right has been deflated. This individual wanted Jesus to tell him some particular action which he needed to do, some particular virtue which he needed to practice, but he was not prepared for Jesus' solution. He was comfortable with all that he had; he felt secure in his wealth. Jesus' suggestion to abandon

all that in order to follow him was more than this man could handle. He goes away sad. One can imagine that Jesus is a little saddened as well, and he turns to his disciples to offer them a lesson on too much dependence on material goods and the bold choices which one must make.

Let us be clear here. This is a good man. When he says that he follows the commandments, Jesus believes him, and so should we. When Jesus invites him to a deeper discipleship, we should believe that this man wants that as well, but he is not prepared to surrender what is most important in his life at that moment: his security in his possessions. Perhaps, with a little time and more reflection, he will come to that point, but he is not ready to make that choice at this moment.

When we listen to this story, we should not think that Jesus would say the same thing to us that he says to this rich man. He might not ask us to make the same choice. We, too, can say that we keep the commandments, but when Jesus tells us the deeper reality which we must surrender to follow him (or the situation which we must embrace), it may not deal with material possessions. For us, it might be something different. Jesus can look in our hearts and see what we need to change in order to allow him to be the center of our life. Do you know what it is for you and for your province? Are you prepared to identify that one element of which you would need to let go in order for Jesus to genuinely be the most important value in your life? Perhaps you do not even want to think about that! Perhaps it is not the possessions which we carry around on our backs, but those which we carry in our hearts!

Perhaps we would need to surrender the need to have the right answer all the time. Perhaps we would need to be the one who does more than our share of a particular task. Perhaps we would need to be the one who can grant forgiveness to those who have hurt us. Perhaps we are the one who would need to ask for pardon. Whatever it is, there may well be something in our lives which keeps us from allowing Jesus to hold that central position and give us direction and focus. This separates us from him. He looks at us with love, but we turn away sad because that is the one thing which we are unwilling to surrender.

Listen to this story, it is about us. It reminds us of what we must do in order to allow Jesus to be the center of our lives, to call us to greater acts of charity. The encounter suggests to us our need to act with boldness in order to pursue him faithfully. Jesus wants us to follow him and he points out the way in which we can do that, but he says it to each of us personally when we are prepared to listen. We are asked to look at our vocation and pay attention to the demands of our charism. We are asked to recognize our special "need" and to be willing to surrender it in order to allow him to take the central place in our lives. We are asked to "become ever more deeply rooted in Jesus Christ"

(IAD, p. 9). As he regarded the rich man, Jesus looks on us with love and invites us to deeper discipleship. We need the grace to be able to respond fully to that invitation and allow him to be the center of our lives and ministry on behalf of those who are poor.

One of the interesting lessons which this story can teach us about boldness in charity is that (sometimes) we are not in competition with the opinion of other people and with ways of living which others suggest. Sometimes, we are confronted by ourselves. The alternative way of acting may well be one to which we invite ourselves by living our charism in a faithful but ordinary way as we live within the suggestions of our commitments. To act boldly can suggest new roads and different decisions which will upset our preferred and comfortable paths.

The question which we ask ourselves is not: "what do I want to do" or "how do I stay within the bounds imposed by our rules"? The questions become: "Lord, what do you want me to do? What do I/we still lack? What decisions still allows me/us to live our commitment in a mediocre fashion? Where does boldness in charity lead me?"

### III. The Last Judgment: "When did we ever see you hungry?"

This powerful story in Matthew's Gospel was one of the favorites of St. Vincent. Note that it is not a parable. It is presented as a description experience of the end time! That may attract our attention to its boldness in a particular way.

*"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me'. Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?'. And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me'. Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me'. Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or*

*thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?'. He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me'. And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matt 25:31-46).*

First of all, note also the repetitiveness of the telling. We are told over-and-over (four times!) that the Lord is served in the most ordinary of ways – in food, clothing, shelter and visits. I am oftentimes tempted to shorten this reading but I think that this effort would miss the intent of the emphasis. We need to get the point, and thus it is repeated so that at the end we cannot say "I did not know what I should be doing". It is simple: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, attend to those imprisoned. These possibilities are no more available to the rich than the poor. The Lord must be served in these ways. It is not complicated and it means eternal life. None of these tasks are alien to our ministry as followers of St. Vincent!

Secondly, note that both those on the right and the left ask the same question: when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or in prison? The implication for those rejected is that if they had recognized the Lord, they would have responded positively to his needs. Yet, those who are saved are welcomed into the Kingdom of the Lord voice the same question: when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or in prison? They did not recognize the Lord in their service, but they carried out their ministry anyway. We remember how Vincent urged us to "turn the coin". Jesus is not especially evident in the poor, but is there nonetheless. We are called to respond to him as he chooses to be present and not as we are enabled to recognize him.

Thirdly, note that the service is not carried out on our timetable – when we are ready to act. The idea which gets repeated more than any other (to my hearing, but you can count) is "when". The Lord must be served when the needs are evident: when he is hungry, when he is thirsty, when he is naked, when he is in prison, when he is sick, and so on. The sheep and the goats all ask "when" they did this or did not do this, and the Lord said that it happened whenever they served the least ones (or failed to serve them). This readiness to act on their schedule continues to define the poor as our "lords and masters". There is a boldness required for this ready and immediate service.

This wondrous story of the Last Judgment again connects us with what is necessary for achieving eternal life – just like the parable of the Good Samaritan and the meeting with the Rich Young Man (and so many other stories). The boldness in charity suggested to us in this story can take several forms. First of all, there is a commitment to act when the time is ripe for the needs of the poor and not according to some arbitrary schedule. Secondly, there is an emphasis on

Christ being present and served among the poor which cannot be denied or debated. Third, the type of service to which one is called does not involve miracles but simple and direct service in terms of what is most needed. And finally, the story reminds us of the blessing which we can be for one another when we offer each other the opportunity to enter into the service of the poor. Being bold in all these ways suggests the direction for our missionary momentum. Do you feel the urge?

#### **IV. The Washing of the Feet: “How do I welcome the Lord?”**

The story of the woman who is a public sinner yet who comes to wash the feet of Jesus is endlessly fascinating for me. It says a lot about the boldness of charity.

*A Pharisee invited him to dine with him, and he entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment... [Jesus] turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment. So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little” (Lk 7:36-38, 44-47).*

Notice how the woman serves Jesus. It is completely personal. Another could offer hospitality, through some friendly action of service in a much simpler manner. Providing water and a towel so that someone could wash their own feet would be a salutary effort. Placing a drop of perfume on the top of a person's head adds a pleasant scent to one's surroundings. A gentle kiss on the cheek shows one's affection for the other. As wonderful as these signs of welcome might be, they are not the way in which this woman greets Jesus! There is nothing ordinary or impersonal about her care.

This woman washes Jesus' feet herself with her tears and dries them with her hair. One can wonder at the source and reason for her tears, but they certainly signify her deepest self and her feelings. As these tears provide the water for the washing, her own hair provides the towel for the drying. She is completely invested in the effort to serve and reverence Jesus. The kiss, that act of affection and intimacy which signifies the closeness of persons and is usually done face-to-face, is

placed upon the feet of Jesus. In fact, the woman showers his feet with her kisses. As Jesus says: "*She has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered*". Her desire to welcome Jesus into her life is profound. And finally, the perfume is employed to anoint the feet of Jesus. Thinking herself unworthy to approach the head of Jesus with her oil and to offer her gift there – remember the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "*You anoint my head with oil*" (23:5) – she continues her care at his feet. Sometimes these special (and expensive) oils might be kept by an uncommitted woman as an investment and an insurance policy for her future. This woman pours her ointment upon the feet of Jesus. She invests her future in him.

Considering the boldness of the action of this woman in her care of Jesus, we can ask ourselves what lessons are being offered for our future. Her response to him is contrasted with that of Simon, the Pharisee, who is Jesus' official host. What does this woman teach us about how to carry out our charitable ministry?

There are many possibilities. First of all, we are invited to carry it forth with humility. The placement at the feet of Jesus emphasizes that truth repeatedly. Our service must also be a total investment of self: of our feelings and our person (suggested by her tears and her hair). We give ourselves completely to the ministry and care of those whom we serve and who are in need. And we do so with love. The kisses are a sign of this affection for us. And, finally, we invest in those who are poor. All our resources are brought to bear in the support and care which we bring. The future is expressed and invested in the person who is served. Whatever we can do to make their lives more pleasant and humane, we do. There is no counting the cost as one strives to express great love. One gives the whole of one's self and one's resources, as the woman models for us in this Gospel story.

This narrative of the sinful woman is a wonderful one for us for teaching the boldness of charity. This woman brings herself into an environment in which she was clearly not welcome to seek and serve Jesus. She does so without hesitation or embarrassment and with the total gift of herself. She has much to teach us about courage and activism and the direction to which it can point in the carrying out of our charism.

## CONCLUSION

The "boldness of charity" is a wonderful phrase. It draws our attention to the dynamic character of the charism which is ours as followers of St. Vincent. It also promotes the missionary momentum which sends us forth in the service of the crucified Christ. The Bible offers an extraordinary base for reflection and action in this regard. Each of the stories treats charitable action and suggests an insight to us for our

emulation and enrichment. Each of the stories and presentations can enable us to enter into a deeper contemplation and call to action.

We have noted the way in which the stories can enable us to ask some questions:

1. Whom should I serve?
2. How shall I serve them?
3. When shall my service take place?
4. What shall I do?

These questions can offer a starting point for our thoughts. They can also suggest to us an opening for looking at other stories. What do you learn about boldness in charity from the stories of:

- Lazarus and the Rich Man (Lk 16:19-31)
- The Widow's Mite (Lk 21:1-4)
- The Parable of the Rich Fool (Lk 12:13-21)
- Paul's Hymn on Love (1 Cor 13)
- Jesus' teaching that "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35)
- Paul's teaching that "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7)
- Entertaining Angels (Heb 13:2)
- Paul's Letter to Philemon
- The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish (Mk 6:30-44)
- Charity practices of the early Christian Community in Acts of the Apostles (4:32-37)
- Jesus' finding inspiration for his ministry in: *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me* (Lk 4:16-30)
- The Healing of blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46-52)
- The Widow and insisting on justice (Lk 18:1-8)