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Jesus often proclaimed the Gospel in parables that challenged the assumptions and prejudices of his listeners. One of the most familiar is that of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37).

The point of that parable was not that we should always lend a helping hand to a neighbor in need. Too obvious, and, therefore, not challenging.

No, the main point of the story was that the hated Samaritan was "good." He alone came to the aid of the man who had been beaten and robbed.

First, came a priest, "and when he saw him he passed by on the other side." Then a Levite, and he, too, "passed by on the other side."

Both were highly respected members of the Jewish establishment.

And then came the Samaritan.

It is utterly crucial to remember that to the Jews Samaritans were a heretical and schismatic group of false worshipers of the God of Israel. They were detested even more than the pagans.

Indeed, Jesus' own disciples were shocked when he conversed with a Samaritan woman (Jn 4:27).

But Jesus would have none of that bigotry. The purpose of his preaching was to tell us that if we hope to inherit the reign of God and enter into eternal life, we must love one another as brother and sister -- even those whom we regard as enemies, traitors, heretics, and worse.

That message, folded into the parable of the Good Samaritan, caught Jesus' audience by surprise. He wasn't telling them a safely predictable story about helping one's neighbor in need.

There was an unexpected and jarring twist to it. The Samaritan, a detested enemy of "upright" Jews, acted like a good neighbor to another in need, in contrast to the indifferent and irresponsible behavior of two respected and "upright" members of their own community.

Had Jesus been addressing a U.S. audience some 19-and-a-half centuries later, he might very well have substituted a gay or a lesbian for the Samaritan. Homosexuals fall roughly into the same category of the despised, reviled, and resented.

As we approach next week's presidential election, there are three highly publicized referenda on the ballots in Oregon, Colorado, and Maine.

In Oregon political advertising has been equating homosexuals with pedophiles, and voters have been urged to support an amendment to the state constitution that would classify homosexuality as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural or perverse. "

According to The New York Times, the amendment would require the state of Oregon to take an active role in discouraging homosexuality at all of state authority, from zoning commissions to fish and game licensing.

In Colorado, too, a proposed constitutional amendment would prohibit any community in the state from passing laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination.

And in Portland, Me. voters will consider an initiative to repeal the city's five-month-old ordinance prohibiting discrimination against homosexuals.

All three campaigns have originated with right-wing Protestant groups who read the Bible in a fundamentalistic way, which is to say uncritically. They have soul-mates in the Catholic Church as well.

Their campaign strategy has been clever, if perverse. They falsely portray anti-discrimination laws as affirmative-action gambits, and they prey upon the fears of parents for the physical safety and moral well-being of their children.

But how explain the zeal that fuels this campaign?

Many who resist anti-discrimination legislation sense that they have lost the abortion battle. It is by now obvious that their often strident anti-abortion rhetoric frightened moderates and energized women, even those who are opposed to abortion on moral grounds.

Consequently, there is much greater political risk today in being anti-abortion than in being pro-choice.

And so homosexuals have become the new target of opportunity. Significantly, polls are showing that even some liberals and moderates are prepared to vote against gay rights. The concerns of gays and lesbians, unlike those of women, have not yet galvanized the broad center of the electorate.

Moreover, the language of the debate is biased. It speaks of sexual "preference" rather than sexual "orientation," as if it were scientifically established that gays and lesbians "choose" to be homosexual in about the same way that one chooses to be a Democrat or a Republican.

In such a climate harsh and outrageous rhetoric abounds. Every Christian should have been appalled and sickened by the Newsweek photo of a sign held aloft during the St. Patrick's Day parade in Boston last spring: "God Hates Fags. "

That sign surely does not reflect the moral values and sentiments of a majority of the population nor of the church, but the vileness of its message indicates why gays and lesbians need the pmtection of law. Not favoritism. Just protection.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers. . . ."

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