

Lent Reflections for 2021

Lent Reflection Week 3

The parable of the Good Samaritan triggered a warm feeling in me as a child. I still remember exactly when I heard the story for the first time in the children's service. Later, when I was involved in the children's service and told the children about the parable, it was one of my favourite stories. In my mother tongue, German, the term Good Samaritan is also used to describe people who support others in their need. In many interpretations, not only the origin of the Samaritan is emphasised, but also his professionalism in caring for the injured, and the skills and experience he uses to do so. Thus, the Good Samaritan has also become a symbol for medical professions and institutions. This story was the motivation and inspiration for me to choose a helping profession and to professionalise my aspiration to help others.

In my early days at the Seamen's Mission, over 20 years ago now, I saw seafarers first and foremost as people in need whom we help by picking them up from the ships (carrying them), providing them with the necessities (caring for them), having an open ear for them (giving them attention), and not infrequently also standing up for their rights (when others leave them lying). And all this regardless of their origin, their faith, their position on board.

A colleague reported at the time that she was on her way home in the middle of the night after a long shift and saw a figure on the side of the road. As she got closer, she thought the man looked like a sailor who had been in the mission that evening. And she was right, it was a Kiribati sailor sitting there huddled up. She got out and spoke to him. He cried bitterly and said, "I see my ship, it's over there, but I don't know how to get there." He had been walking around for some time and had not been able to find the road to the Terminal in the huge harbour area. I am sure that many cars had passed this sailor that evening. And I'm sure one or two others noticed him. But similarly, as in the parable, no one else stopped. Thanks to her professional eye, my colleague was not only able to perceive the sailor, but also knew what to do: she brought him to the ship and he was infinitely grateful.

Over time, my view of the seafarers broadened. Yes, they need support in many things. But isn't that also a very deficit view? At the same time, isn't it also the case that WE need THEM? Long before the pandemic, I often had conversations with seafarers who, when they heard that I was working as a volunteer and therefore unpaid, and actually had another job, sometimes almost asked in amazement why I was doing this. I then explained to them that I wanted to give something back because THEY provide for US. And that therefore, in addition to direct contact, lobbying was particularly important to me, to make society aware of the great achievement of these "undercover heroes". Seafarers are away from their families, their friends and their home country for a long time, often have to put up with difficult working conditions and may also be confronted with dangers (e.g., weather conditions, accidents, piracy). And they too, just like the Good Samaritan, have to contend with prejudice, depending on where they come from, what they believe in, what position they occupy on board, or simply because they are seafarers ("drunken sailors"). Of course, they do it mainly because it is their job, but so do people in medical or social professions. They help and support through their professionalism and with openness towards those in need. Seafarers are also highly qualified people; they must be. And therefore, it was long overdue that they be recognised as essential workers, which has now finally happened because of the pandemic.

Although it's not completely comparable, I like the idea that we are all walking in the footsteps of the Good Samaritan.

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