

“The one who showed him mercy...”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, July 14, 2019
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Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to hi, “Go and do likewise.”
Luke 10:25-37

Will you pray with me. Merciful and wise God, help us to think about the story of the “good Samaritan” as if it was for the first time. Give us new ears to take it in, renewed minds to receive its wisdom, and open hearts desiring to carry out its lesson this day. Amen.

The first preaching assignment I gave to the students in Bangor Seminary’s preaching class that I was teaching several years ago was to prepare and deliver a sermon on our text for today, Luke 10:25-37. The students looked at me as incredulously as I looked at *my* preaching professor, Walter Dickhaut, in the late 1990’s when he assigned our whole class to preach on this same text for our first sermon. How in the world could seven people all preach on the same text and not end up saying the same thing seven times in a row? What happened when *I* was teaching the preaching class was exactly what happened when Walter made this assignment to *my* preaching class. We heard seven different sermons, each one well crafted and delivered, each one focusing on some different but important point about the story of the Good Samaritan.

It’s just that kind of story – rich and full of meaning on multiple levels. Why do you think this story has so much power? (get responses) For me, the power of the Good Samaritan’s story comes in two ways -- first, it is the fact that each of the characters in the story could be any of us at one time or another in our lives. Second, the power comes from the universal question the lawyer poses to Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk 10:25) I’ll get to that second power in a minute.

First, whether we want to admit to it or not, we have been the priest and the Levite who walked by on the other side of the street – even though the person in the ditch was most likely one of their kind, a Jew, not some outsider whom they considered to be untouchable in all ways.

I've done this, so I know you have, too – I've chosen not to get involved in another person's misery because of time constraints, or maybe my own issues and worries, or not trusting that the person who appears in need is really in need. Maybe they're just pretending to be in need in order to get something from me, or even rob me. You can't be too careful nowadays, you know.

There are all kinds of characters of ill will running around – who knows what their ulterior motives might be. We need to be careful about who we tend to, who we touch, don't we? And besides, I tell myself, you all pay me to respond to *your* pastoral needs, not the needs of some stranger whom I've never seen before and will never see again. I don't like it that I have these thoughts tucked in the back of my mind, but I do.

Whether we want to admit it or not, perhaps in one way or another, we have been the robbers who took from another and didn't care that we'd left someone damaged and hurt to the core. Surely none of us would rob someone, strip them and beat them and leave them for dead, but haven't we said, or at least thought, cutting words to someone who did us wrong, not considering what the impact of those words might be? I've had people speak to me like that several times. And I don't like to admit it, but I know I've done it to others, too. Maybe it hasn't even been toward someone who has wronged me, but someone I don't know at all whom I've treated poorly and not given it a second thought.

And whether we want to forget it or not, we have been the man in the ditch, left to die after being robbed. Perhaps we're down because of illness or accident, a job lost, a relationship ended either in anger or because of the death of a loved partner. The man in the ditch in this story doesn't have a speaking part – perhaps because he's too close to physical death, but more so perhaps because he realizes the one who has come to offer help is not one of *his* kind. His savior is a stranger, someone whom he would never associate with in better times. You can't be too careful about *receiving* help nowadays. What might be the *real* motive of the one who says they want to help you? There could be another motive for their actions beyond pure good will.

Perhaps we're the innkeeper, not real happy that this stranger has dropped off another ailing stranger for us to take care of. They both might be trying to play a trick on us – perhaps checking us out to see how they can take advantage of us. But we go ahead and do what one of them says just because he speaks with some authority. And after all, he does say he'll pay us good money for our time and trouble.

And finally, whether we want to own up to it or not, we have been and will be again the Good Samaritan who cares for someone totally unlike himself. Samaritans were hated by Jews in Jesus' day. In modern day terms, the Samaritan in this story would be someone from "the other side of the tracks," or even, dare we say it, perhaps an illegal immigrant, or a member of a religious group we hold in disgust or are afraid of because they're so different from us in their practices and traditions. What would *we* do if someone like that offered to help us? How would we respond if we were that "other," that illegal, that zealous religious individual whom others held in contempt?

In any community we'll find all these characters --

people with prejudices that keep them from associating with those who are different from them,

people who take advantage of others and don't give it a second thought,
people who are in great need of help because of their own illness or misfortune,
people who are just doing their job everyday, without passion or purpose, and
people who can't imagine *not* helping another, no matter their color, their ethnic origin, or their religious or political leanings.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is rich because we're all in it in one way or another. We all have human frailties and faults that cause us to not treat one another well. And, at the same time, we have the capacity for human compassion and care within us, nudging us to support the "other," any "other," no matter who they are or represent to us.

Yet, there's one other character in the passage who leads me to the second source of power in the story -- the lawyer, the one who stands up to test Jesus by saying, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Lk 10:25) Isn't his question one we all have? We may not have any idea what eternal life could really be like, but I know I'd like to have an answer to that question.

Jesus answers the lawyer by saying, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" and the lawyer recites the words from Torah in Deuteronomy, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all you mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Deuteronomy 9:5) Jesus tells him that's the right answer. And the lawyer responds, "And who is my neighbor?" (Lk 10:29) In a holy nutshell the answer to the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?", is love God and your neighbor, whoever your neighbor is.

The quote I put in your bulletins today reminds us of the relevance of the Good Samaritan story: "Anyone asked to state the essence of Christianity (and in a religiously pluralistic society Christians are asked to do that, both implicitly and explicitly, every day) would not err too greatly by pointing to the parable of Jesus about the Good Samaritan."¹ A lawyer questions Jesus about how to achieve eternal life and Jesus tells him a story to demonstrate how we are to treat one another and thus respond to God's mercy upon all of us. To show mercy for the "other," all others, no matter who they are, is the bottom line of a life of faith and of eternal life itself.

The "good Samaritan" in the parable wasn't looking for glory or a roadmap showing *him* how to gain entrance to eternal life.

He wasn't concerned with how good *he* needed to be or what he had to do in *his* personal life.

He simply showed compassion for a person in need, without concern for the consequences, or the rewards.

Let us go and do likewise. Let the people say, "Amen."

¹Douglas John Hall in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, p. 238.