

## Sermon for July 10, 2016 – “New Neighbor”

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT, Year c – Texts: Luke 10:25-37

A Sunday school teacher, was telling her class the story of the “Good Samaritan.” She described it in vivid detail so her students would catch the drama. Then she asked the class, “If you saw a person lying on the roadside all wounded and bleeding – what would you do?” The class was silent, until one thoughtful little girl broke the silence and said: “I think I’d be sick!”

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a familiar one indeed. Perhaps too familiar. One of my seminary professors used to tell us: “Don’t confuse familiarity with understanding.” It’s great advice especially with parables we’ve all heard many times before and assume we understand completely. The parable of the Good Samaritan is certainly in that category. We’re quite familiar with the traditional boiling down of this parable’s message to an example story: “Don’t be like this. “Be like this.” “Don’t be self-righteous; assuming God can’t work through people you look down on. Instead be like the Samaritan, helping those you meet each day who need your help.”

We kind of talked about that last week, that God can use anyone, and there’s some of that truth here. But that’s not the only message of the parable of the Good Samaritan. This morning I want to look at another, starting here...

A lawyer “wanting to justify himself,” asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers...” The rest we are quite familiar with. But, I keep going back to what Luke writes about the lawyer “wanting to justify himself...” How interesting that Luke would mention that. You see, our words give us away. Something terrible happens. A heart-breaking tragedy. A sickening accident. Malicious behavior resulting in the destruction of someone’s life. Maybe we know the people who are involved personally. Maybe not. Maybe it’s just one more recital of the daily news blasted into our living rooms or blaring forth in the headlines for us to look at whether we want to or not. “Two adults and four children die in house fire.” “Man shoots, kills girlfriend – then turns gun on himself.” The kind of tragic events that happen almost everywhere every day. And if we’re sympathetic, if we haven’t become so numb by all the bad news and still feel some ounce of sorrow for human suffering, we find ourselves saying, or thinking, something like, “There, but for the grace of God go I.” And, of course, we say it or feel it often without thinking about it. We’re reacting, more or less, to something happening to someone else, someone we don’t really know, someone we don’t really have to care about, that is, if we can keep some (meaning, safe) distance from them. Which is exactly what we’re doing when we say, “There, but for the grace of God go I.” There. Not **here**. Not where I stand and see the world. And maybe that’s the problem, that we’re not able to **see**. Or maybe we don’t want to, and feel the need to justify ourselves.

As you may’ve noticed from time to time, there’s very often a kind of strange silence about Jesus. It’s a silence that happens at the precise moment somebody wants Him to say something. Like Pilate at the moment Jesus’ enemies have Him right where they want Him. Or when somebody has questions for Him, questions that really aren’t so much questions as they are pre-conceived notions or something they already believe or understand to be true; something that they hope, and probably expect, Jesus will confirm. Like the man’s questions in this week’s gospel reading.

A lawyer, says Luke, who stood up to test Him because the kind of questions that lawyers ask are never **really** what they seem. So Jesus doesn’t answer him directly. His silence takes the form of a parable about which He doesn’t make a single value judgment. What I mean is that Jesus, popular assumptions aside, doesn’t judge anyone in this well-known parable. Nor does he tell us what it means.

He doesn't neatly wrap it up in a three-point sermon for us take home and discuss over Sunday brunch or dinner. Nope, nothing that sentimental or trivial. He simply tells a story the way **He** sees the world. Then He's silent, leaving us to see if we can see for ourselves. And **what** exactly does Jesus want us to see about His famous story? Better yet – **how** did Jesus want us to see?

He wanted us to see it from the point of view of the central character in the parable...And which one would that be? The priest? The Levite? The Samaritan? I think that it's the one who became a victim. A good argument could possibly be made for the Samaritan, but I think that for Jesus the victim is the narrative focus of the story. He's the one who is there in every scene. He's the one to whom everything happens, and, And if we hear the story rightly, we hear it from **his** point of view. There's really no other perspective that matters.

Jesus asks a question at the conclusion of his parable, "Which of these three proved neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" He seems, in effect, to be asking: "Tell me, lawyer, if you were the beaten man, how then who would you define 'neighbor'?" You see, the lawyer's **real** question behind "and who is my neighbor?" is this, "To whom specifically must we **show** love in the future?" But by the end of the parable, however, Jesus' rephrased question asks, instead "From whom would we like to **receive** love...especially in the event that we find ourselves in need?" Looking at the parable in this way kind of turns things upside down, doesn't it? I mean, we've always been taught that we have to be like the Good Samaritan and that everyone is our neighbor, right? But, brothers and sisters, here's the thing...Jesus knows us better. He knows that if we see ourselves as Samaritans, as people faced with the prospect (the burden, actually) of giving to others in need, then our definition of neighbor is probably going to be pretty narrow in scope.

What am I talking about? Well, think of it this way, the Samaritan sees the guy by the road side. He stopped, got his first aid kit and tended to his wounds as best as he could, right? We can probably do that. He then puts the victim in the passenger seat of his car. We can probably do that too, right? Okay – so far so good. But then the Samaritan abandons his planned itinerary, gets a room at the nearest motel and then spends the night caring for a complete stranger! Could any of us do **that**? Honestly, could we? I honestly don't know that I could... I don't know. But that's not all there is to this. The next morning, the Samaritan continues on his way but first, he leaves two denarii with the innkeeper to pay for any charges the robbery victim incurs. (Remember, the guy was robbed, he has no money to pay for anything.) Two denarii – how much is that? The bible says that one denarius was equal to about a day's wage. So how much is that in real money these days? One of the great things about the 40-hour week is that it makes it easy to figure out either an annual salary or an hourly rate. A 40-hour week times 50 work weeks is 2,000 hours a year. The median annual household income in Cincinnati is about \$71,356...Rounding up, that works out to about \$36 an hour. Two days' wages equals 16 hours of work, or 16 x \$36 – or \$576.

So, to all of us thinking we'd be the Samaritan, let me ask you this. After staying the night at the motel taking care of someone you've never met would you throw \$576 (or more) in cash on the front desk then promise to pay whatever else was owed when you came back on your return trip? That's a tough question, isn't it? On the other hand, seeing it from the victim's point of view is easier. When we do, when we see this as someone who's been left by the side of the road, someone desperate for help from anyone, anywhere, then our definition of neighbor is likely to be much, much broader.

If you've ever been in that kind of need, and I'm guessing that some of you have, you know what I'm talking about. And so here's the thing, there's only one thing we truly need to see, something beyond our precious principles, beyond our sophisticated theologies, beyond our cherished opinions, and it's what Jesus wants us to see. And what's that? It's that we are that man in the ditch...every last one of us. Seeing ourselves that way helps us to realize something crucial about ourselves, that whether or not we realize it, or accept it, every last one of us wants to treat others – and **be** treated – the way those who are truly alive treat one another. What does that mean “to be truly alive”? It means both giving **and** receiving mercy. It means binding up each other's wounds, physical and emotional, no matter how messy. It means bearing one another's burdens, no matter how heavy. It means taking care of one another, no matter what the cost. It means going to hell and back for one another if necessary. Not because we **should**, but because that's the way things **are**, because that's what we're commanded to do. Not because, “There, but for the grace of God go I...” but because there's no “there” for those who are truly alive. Because it's the only way to **see** and truly **live**.

Sometimes it just takes the desire to help. I promise you, if you really want to, if you really want to, if you really, really want to justify yourself, then, you can – and **will** – find a way. Maybe it's time we started! It's really not that difficult. It's certainly not rocket science! There's a quote I love, maybe it'll help...It goes like this...

“Sympathy sees and says, ‘I’m sorry.’”

“Compassion sees and says, ‘I’ll help.’”

When we **learn** the difference...

We'll **make** a difference.

I mean, c'mon, you know the commandments... Now go and do likewise!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.