

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – PROPER 10

July 11, 2010C

Luke 10:25-37

“God of bandit places, love that demands our all: reveal to us our wounds and give us grace to know our neighbor, tending us with foreign hands; through Jesus Christ...”

(Prayers for An Inclusive Church, Steven Shakespeare)

Who is the Good Samaritan of all humanity.

Amen.

The parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ is one of the best known of Jesus’ stories found in the gospel. It’s also one of the most challenging and troubling, thanks in part to that darn question the lawyer asks Jesus! Luke tells us that he wanted to ‘justify himself,’ perhaps expecting Jesus to reassure him that his rationalizations were well founded and that no one, including God or a rabbi, would actually expect him to really **do** anything for some strangers in need. He wanted an easy black and white answer from Jesus which he doesn’t get. Instead, Jesus responds with telling a story – a story meant to move the lawyer – and us, out of our heads into our hearts. What if that half-dead man laying on the side of the road was that lawyer, watching as the priest and Levite, the ones expected to provide pastoral care, walk past him pretending they didn’t see him, only then to have a despised Samaritan stop and offer him compassion? What Jesus suggested seemed impossible and even unspeakable, so much so, that when Jesus offers the punch line: “Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the man who fell in with robbers?” the poor guy couldn’t bring himself to say ‘the Samaritan.’ Lesson # 1 in today’s gospel for me is that it’s much easier for us to often stay in our heads than move into our hearts when it comes to putting into action compassionate care for those in need. I’m reminded of a Haitian proverb which says, “What the eye doesn’t see, doesn’t move the heart.”

It was late in the day in December, one of those days when it gets dark before 5 PM. I was in a staff meeting near the end of the workday, watching the clock so I could get on the road as soon as possible, once the meeting ended. I was a hospice chaplain at the time, working at Floyd Medical Center in Rome, Georgia. Jeff was five and I had promised that I’d be home in time to see him perform in a holiday pageant at school that evening and I knew getting through Atlanta rush hour traffic would be a bit challenging. To my surprise, the hospice director called me out of the meeting. A local social service agency called to see if I would be willing to help a man in need. It was closing time and the folks at the agency didn’t know what to do. I was told that the man was hungry, homeless and had recently found out that he had AIDS. Would I be willing to help him? I knew I wanted to get on the road soon. My head said “no.” Quite frankly, I didn’t want to get involved. But my heart moved me to at least take the phone call. The man told me that he didn’t know anyone in town. Could I offer him some help? I told him I could help with one of his needs. I would be willing to meet him at five o’clock and buy some food for him.

When I met him on the street, I quickly realized that the man had been drinking. He reeked of alcohol. I took him to a nearby McDonalds so he could have something to eat and told him that I would gladly meet with him in the morning to put him in touch with some good resources. He told me that he appreciated my concern, but it probably wouldn’t be of any help to him. It was a cold evening and he had no place to stay. He told me he could be dead by morning. I told him I couldn’t

help him with anything else at the present moment. I needed to get on the road so I'd be able to make my son's holiday performance. It was at that point that the man asked if I'd be passing through Cartersville and that, if so, could I give him a ride to the hospital. He thought the folks there would be able to help get him into a facility for people living with AIDS. I knew at the time that there were no such facilities in Cartersville but decided, in the moment, to offer him a ride. As we drove along the road, the man ate his hamburger and drank his coffee, telling me a heart-wrenching story of how he had lost his wife and daughter in a tragic car accident. I sensed that this man had so much hurt and pain in him that I wondered if his apparent abuse of alcohol was his way of coping.

I became consciously aware of the grace of God in my life and genuinely sensed the presence of Christ in my car. It was as if this homeless, rather intoxicated, HIV-infected man was a living reminder for me that night – about 8 or 9 days before Christmas, that God in Christ comes to us in unexpected, surprise-filled ways.

But that awareness didn't last long. The trip soon turned into a nightmare. The man's personality drastically changed. He became extremely angry and wanted me to stop at a store and buy him some razor-blades. He said that he wanted to go into the woods and take his life. He spoke to me in a very demeaning way, saying that he made a bet with the woman who called me from the social service agency that all I'd probably do to help him was to offer him a cup of coffee. She told him I probably could help him but according to him, she was wrong. I'm just like all the others. Well, I was so distressed by this man's hostility and ridicule I made a wrong turn. I remember being concerned that this man might jump out of my car on a busy highway. So I kept talking to him, letting him know that it might be a good idea for me to accompany him into the hospital. He now said that he wasn't sure he really wanted to go to the hospital after all. As a matter of fact, he said he just wanted to travel with me to Atlanta. I ignored him as I pulled into the emergency entrance at the hospital and, after a brief but persuasive argument I was able to get him into the building. Long story short, when we were brought into the triage area, a nurse told me it would take a little longer before a doctor could see us. I was at my wits end. I told the nurse that I was a minister seeking help for an intoxicated man with suicidal ideations and that I need to leave. All this time, the man kept shouting in a voice everyone in the crowded emergency room could hear: "Bob, how could you do this to me? I thought we were friends. Why have you brought me here?" I walked out the door, got into my car, and drove as quickly as I could to Jeff's performance, which I barely made. I never saw that man again, although someone from an agency called me a week or so later to see if I could help a man who turned out to be the same person!

I share this long, complicated and exasperating story to illustrate from my personal experience how difficult it is in the countless situations we all face in life to truly be a compassionate neighbor to those we meet who are in need. The moral of the story that cold December night could have been that there are far more compelling reasons to leave some 'half-dead' people on the side of the dangerous roads we travel than to risk our own lives getting involved in complicated situations where the best we might actually offer our 'neighbor' is a cup of coffee. But it wasn't. What I learned that night (once again!) is that if we take the message of Jesus seriously about loving our neighbor, we're going to get into messy situations where we need the wisdom and strength of Jesus' Spirit to lead and guide us.

I don't think most of wake up each morning wondering how we can be a "Good Samaritan" today. More often than not, we find ourselves in situations where we don't have a lot of time to consider whether or not we want to get involved or not. It sort of 'happens.' Perhaps the voice of God's Spirit

within us compels us to act in a given situation. Maybe it's our need to be needed, or our desire to make a difference. I'm not always sure myself. What I do know is that we take a risk. And in making ourselves available to others, we often find ourselves in uncomfortable situations. And, when all is said and done, the ending might not be as happy an ending as the one Jesus tells in today's parable.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asks of Jesus. And Jesus tells a story where the tag line is that the neighbor is the one who shows compassion. Does it mean that we help every one we see in need? No, but it does mean that we not dismiss anyone in need as unworthy of God's love and compassion - even our enemies, including people we don't like or those who don't like us. Jesus shows us that the way we love the God we cannot see is to love the neighbor we do see. Our love of God and our love of neighbor are intricately related, and our neighbor includes the strangers we meet along the dangerous road of life.

Our neighbors today include the undocumented Hispanic/Latino migrant workers right here in North Carolina. Our neighbors today include Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews, as well as the people of Iran and Iraq and Afghanistan. Our neighbors include those fighting hunger and malnutrition in Darfur and Haiti and other parts of the world where almost 10 million children die before reaching their fifth birthday. Our neighbors are Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, some of whom are present here today with The Ulster Project. Our neighbors include the people in the Gulf States slammed by the present oil catastrophe as well as the people here in Greenville some of whom our youth will meet on their local mission trip this coming week.

I'm actually grateful that Luke tells us about the lawyer who tried to justify himself in asking Jesus to exactly spell out 'who is my neighbor.' We need the parable of the Good Samaritan to keep us honest and maybe even humble when it comes to identifying ourselves as Christians - disciples of Jesus who express our love of the God we cannot see through our compassionate care for the neighbor we do see.

The challenge Jesus presents to the lawyer is the same one we are given this morning: "Go and do likewise." And, as we know all too well, it's not always easy to say...

Amen!

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