

Sunday, July 10, 2022
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 10 (Year C)

Luke 10.25-37

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1166281663935594>

(Sermon begins at about 18:20)

“Go and Do Likewise”

Things were going so well. This lawyer comes to Jesus and asks “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” A noble question. In asking something of that nature, the man must have really wanted to live a good and righteous life. Good for him. In typical Jesus fashion, he turns it back to the man: “What is written in the law?” Probably trying to see if his response might give an indication of where the man’s heart really was. Whether he was sincere, or whether he was just trying to game the system. Jesus obviously felt that turning to the Jewish law would be a good starting place. The man answers, “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.” Ding, ding, ding! Perfect answer. He hit all the salient points of the law. “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

Instead of going and doing likewise, the man goes into lawyer mode. He asks, “and who is my neighbor?” Now, we have no way of knowing the intent behind the follow-up question. Was the lawyer trying to cover his bases and wanting to make sure he knows what is meant by “neighbor,” so that he can squeak by with minimal effort, with only loving those that he absolutely had to love in order to obtain eternal life? Or did he somehow sense that the key to all of this was in the definition of “neighbor” and so he was seeking to be as inclusive as possible?

Regardless of the lawyer’s intent, Jesus provides what is undoubtedly the most expansive, the most inclusive, definition of neighbor. Leaving no doubt in the mind of the lawyer and anyone else within earshot, what was expected. An answer that actually served to expand the definition of “neighbor” beyond what is intended in the Jewish law. Now, as a caveat, the Jewish law does not specifically provide a definition of “neighbor.” Just that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. However, based on the nature of some of the laws, a working definition could be inferred. Perhaps another reason the lawyer asked the question in the first place—because he knew there was no clearcut definition. Regardless of whether a neighbor was limited to those who lived in close proximity to an individual or included a broader circle, it is pretty safe to assume that one’s neighbor would be limited to Jews. After all, according to the law, interacting with non-Jews resulted in one being rendered ritual impure. Since ritual purity was really important to the Jews, to expect a good Jew to love a non-Jew would be a bit of a stretch. Although, admittedly, there were exceptions. The law is clear about the treatment of non-Jewish slaves and what were called “resident aliens” living among the Jews. That in many ways, they were to be treated just as a fellow Jew would be. So, yeah, the definition of “neighbor” could have been a bit ambiguous.

Regardless of these nuances, the prevailing understanding of who might be considered neighbor was somewhat limited. At least, as far as the law was concerned. So, Jesus' hypothetical story illustrates just who a true neighbor is. To our ears, the story of the Good Samaritan, filtered through our Christian context, does not really need much explanation. This story is so well-known that the term "Good Samaritan" has made its way into secular language. Even those who do not know the actual story, even those who are not Christian, know what we mean when we refer to a "Good Samaritan." Someone who helps one in need. Someone who cares for the needs of their neighbor. But this is really only part of the story. To fully appreciate what Jesus is conveying in this parable, we need to understand that, in Jesus' time, this story—or rather, the particulars of it—would have been shocking, to say the least. If not downright scandalous. For this, we need a little context.

To illustrate his point as to who one's neighbor is, Jesus could have concocted any number of scenarios. The victim of the robbery was clearly a Jew, as Jesus was speaking in a Jewish context. Plus, the victim was traveling between two Jewish cities situated within solidly Jewish territory. And several of the other principal characters were definitely Jewish—the priest and the Levite. The wild card is the Samaritan. Jesus could have picked from a variety of groups for the protagonist—another Jew, a Roman, any variety of Gentiles. But instead, Jesus made the hero of the story a Samaritan, which is significant. You see, the Jews and the Samaritans were enemies. They had a centuries-old rivalry over land, as well as ongoing arguments over theological understandings and religious practices. Even though they worshiped the same God, even though they were descended from the same religious roots, they considered each other heretics. In a time and culture where everything was rooted in religious identity—and the purity of that identity—these two groups were sworn enemies. They made every effort to avoided each other, if at all possible.

In the parable, the first two people to come upon the poor beaten man are Jewish religious officials. The first is a priest and the second is a Levite. These religious men walk right on past without even stopping. In fact, in both cases, upon seeing the man lying there dying, the priest and the Levite go out of their way to cross to the other side of the road. They don't want to go anywhere near the victim. This is not necessarily because they don't care. After all, as leaders of the temple, they know the law better than anyone. They know the commandments to love, to have mercy, and to care for others. The most likely reason for their not wanting to go near the man is fear that he may be dead. Under Jewish law, touching, or even going near a corpse, other than that of an immediate family member, would render them ritually impure for a period of seven days, requiring an involved process of purification. So best not to risk it. But this raises the question, are they ignoring their responsibility to care for their neighbor in the process? All out of fear of being inconvenienced by purity concerns? Out of self-interest?

Instead, it is a passing Samaritan who comes to his aid. It's not the temple authorities who help their fellow Jew. It is someone who is other, who is considered an enemy, who is moved with pity, who shows mercy on the man, and does everything in his power to help him. He does the best he can to take care of his immediate needs and binds his wounds. Then he takes the man to an inn where he continues to care for him, delaying his travels by a day. As if that isn't enough, the Samaritan leaves the man in the care of the innkeeper, paying two denarii to cover immediate expenses. Two days' wages. Enough money to provide room and board for two weeks! He gives instructions that the innkeeper is to do whatever is needed to care for the man

and to nurse him back to health. The Samaritan promises to return and make good on any additional expenses incurred. Whatever it costs, he will pay it. Now that's generosity. That's compassion. In fact, in his actions, the Samaritan demonstrates the epitome of grace and mercy, of unconditional love. The Samaritan puts God's commandments into action. While the man's own people did absolutely nothing.

Jesus concludes his story with a question – “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” A question that shifts the emphasis from identifying potential neighbors to the more important emphasis on viewing oneself as and actually being a neighbor to whoever we encounter. To whoever happens to cross our path, no matter who they might be. Jesus shifts the focus from ourselves and our own interests to the other, to our neighbor and their needs, no matter what those needs may be, and our responsibility, as a neighbor, to respond. What Jesus is conveying in the parable is that everyone is our neighbor. Even those who are different from us. Even those we don't agree with. Even those we may not like. Even those who may be our most despised enemy. Despite this, our responsibility to be a good neighbor and to act accordingly. Jesus is conveying the radical nature of God's commandment to love and care for our neighbor. More specifically, to care for our neighbor as ourself. That we are to do so selflessly. That we are to do so as if our own well-being, as if our own life, depends on it.

Most parables contain a moral lesson that we are meant to learn. This one, while containing a moral lesson, goes further. It ends with the injunction “go and do likewise.” We are commanded to not only learn, but to live what we learn. Like the lawyer, to reevaluate the definition of neighbor may mean difficult choices when it comes to us living God's commandment to love our neighbor. But as those who follow Christ, as beloveds of God, we must make those difficult choices. We must live into God's commandments to love and care for our neighbor in the fullest sense. No matter who that neighbor may be. What begins as Jesus providing a hypothetical exercise in ethics for the lawyer quickly becomes a call to action for all who hear the parable of the Good Samaritan.

We live in a world that seems as if it is becoming increasingly polarized, creating barriers between neighbors. Where greater emphasis is placed on labels about identity of the other: race or ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, political ideology, just to name a few. Labels that seek to define one's identity, and more often than not, in a pejorative way. As if the totality of one's identity is encapsulated in any one characteristic. So many labels that are becoming more and more derogatory, more and more divisive. Not unlike the label of Jew vs. Samaritan 2,000 years ago. Forgetting that there is only one label, one identity, which is truly important: that we are all beloved of God, made in the image and likeness of God. And, as Jesus points out in his parable, that we are all neighbors of one another.

As Jesus reminded the lawyer, this is who we are as the people of God. That everyone, no matter who they are, is our neighbor. We are called to look upon them with dignity and respect, with love and compassion. And when necessary, even to put that dignity and respect, that love and compassion, into action. This is not optional. This is our calling as the people of God. Maybe, if we would focus on that as opposed to other labels, some of the division and associated animosity might begin to ease. So, as Jesus told the lawyer, with this new perspective, “go and do likewise.”