

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Year C Proper 10  
Luke 10: 25-37  
July 11 2010

I bet everyone in this room knows the story we just heard.  
I bet you can recite most of it by heart.  
In fact, I bet you could ask anyone on the street, regardless of their religion, what they know about the good Samaritan and I bet you would hear similar answers.

A Good Samaritan is one who selflessly helps those in need.

It seems pretty straightforward; what else is there to say?

We all know the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is part of our DNA. And if you think differently try typing Good Samaritan into Microsoft Word. When paired with Samaritan, "good" is capitalized. If you dare to violate this rule, you get that nasty green squiggly line telling you that you better go and capitalize your G.

When this parable was told, however, "good" and "Samaritan" did not go together. For the Jewish people, of whom the victim on the side of the road was one, Samaritans were not good. They were misguided, unfaithful, and dangerous. Samaritans were hated and were to be feared. And certainly, the Samaritans didn't think too highly of the Jews either.

So with this in mind, I think we need to turn the parable on its head. If we don't, we will continue to know the story only as we learned it in Sunday School. Sweet and touching – yes, but not as powerful and radical as it is intended to be.

To begin, I think we need to rename the parable. I think we need to rename it so that the new name can capture the shocking nature of what lies at the heart of the passage.

Perhaps we can rename the story:

*The Parable of the half dead Jew - or –*

*The Parable of the Priest who will see and ignore your pain.*

Would that get your attention? Are these too shocking?

What if we go with:

*The Parable of indifference to suffering - or –*

*The Parable of fearless compassion?*

I prefer these last two because I think they get at what troubles us on the one hand (indifference to suffering) and what inspires us on the other (fearless compassion).

The suffering of the Jew who was beaten and left for dead was visible to all who traveled the dangerous road between Jericho and Jerusalem.

I can see the half dead man now.

He is lying on the side of the road, with one eye swollen shut and blood falling from his head into the other eye. He can just make out with his one open eye the Priest and the Levite walking by on the other side of the road. He even sees the slight adjustment in their walk which allows them to walk past at an even greater distance.

The half dead man's suffering was met with indifference.

Two of his own people saw him and passed him by.

Now, the commentators will say that these two Jewish leaders were on their way to the temple and thus they needed to remain ritually pure. If they touched a dead man, they wouldn't be able to carry out their responsibilities under the law.

But this is using the Law as an excuse. Yes, the law says don't touch someone unclean before you carry out your duties as a Priest in the temple. But the Law also says, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

We will get more into what Scripture says in a minute. For now, we remain with the man on the side of the road, watching his fellow Jews pass him by.

He didn't have the strength to yell out; it was hard enough to breathe.

As he lay in the street, the sun lowers in the sky and hours pass. The man becomes hopeless, knowing that if his own people won't help him - no one will.

Eventually, the man sees a Samaritan coming down the dusty road.

A Samaritan!

Fear, tinged with not a little disgust, began to rise in the man's throat ...fighting for room with his diminishing breath.

What is the Samaritan going to do to him? The half dead man didn't know if he would rather be kicked and put out of his misery or be taken up in caring arms.

The Samaritan is getting closer and closer to the half dead man. He isn't following in the footsteps of the Levite and the Priest. The Samaritan is walking directly towards him.

Put yourself on that road, lying beaten and bleeding.

Who in our world would you just as soon not see coming toward you? Who would you fear?

Think about this because you can't understand the parable unless you see that the man lying in his own blood would - quite possibly - rather die than receive help from the Samaritan moving towards him.

These two groups thought that well of each other.

Is there anyone whose love and care you cannot receive?  
Whose selfless compassion you do not want?

Personally, I have trouble with this question.

Who would I just as soon not see coming towards me?  
Who do I fear?  
Does my group, however I define it, have an enemy?

For instance, as an American, do I consider Russians my enemy? I am sure you saw the same news I did upon my return from Tanzania. The great spy swap! I saw the news and I couldn't take it seriously. Really – Russia our enemy again? For someone my age, the only person who can make a Russian enemy believable is Harrison Ford. The only place I can believe animosity existing between us is in the movie theater.

Seriously, I can't answer the question.

I can come up with a list of people who annoy me.

I can come up with a list of politicians and church leaders I think should retire early.

I can think of people who wronged me at some point in my life.

But, it is hard for me to identify any group about which I can say – these people are my enemy. Or I would rather die than allow this person to help me, to exercise his or her humanity and help me.

So I wonder if I can really understand the parable this morning, or if I can really understand how radical the parable was for those who first heard it.

It would be radical enough if the Jewish people were hailed as heroes for helping a despised Samaritan. But for a Samaritan to be lifted up as the hero - this would be beyond comprehension.

And yet....and yet...

This is the story that Jesus, himself a Jew, told to the Jewish lawyer who approached him.

What is Jesus up to?

What is the question at the heart of this passage?

Is the question "who is my neighbor"

Or, is the question "how will I live my life?"

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer asks Jesus.

Scripture says, "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."

As we started our service this morning we prayed that God grant that we may know and understand what things we ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them.

I think when we hear this parable – this parable of indifference to suffering and fearless compassion – we have to remember the prayer with which we began our service.

What role does grace play in helping us to know and understand what we should do?

The story tells us that the Samaritan was moved with pity. It is the same feeling of compassion that Jesus had when he saw a widow's only son dead.

If the Samaritan hadn't been moved in this way, would he have stopped?

Do we allow the Spirit of God to grace our vision? Do we allow the Spirit to guide our knowing and understanding?

A narrow, self-serving interpretation of the Law guided the Priest and the Levite away from the suffering man.

Grace drew the Samaritan closer.

And closer he came.

Walking with his donkey until he was right up in the face of the half dead Jew.

The suffering man could have given up on the spot; he could have prayed to have his life taken from him at that moment, rather than feel the disgrace of being served by his enemy.

I wonder though if at that moment, the two men meeting face to face might have offered the same prayer to God:

Dear God, grant that I may know and understand what things I ought to do, and may have grace and power faithfully to do them.

The Samaritan looks his enemy in the eye and bends over to tend to the wounds of the half dead man.

The parable today is not so much about identity – who is your neighbor – as it is about action.

In the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurates on earth, being neighborly means being humble, selfless, compassionate and courageous. Being neighborly is about being human and about letting others be human too. Being neighborly is about the courage to reach out and the courage to allow others to reach us.

Amen.