

A Sympathetic Church

Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 10) 2022

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The lectionary gives us a tough text this week: the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's tough partly because it is so familiar to us. Like the religious characters in the parable, when we see it, our temptation is to give it a cursory look, then hurriedly pass by on the other side, not taking the time, to get down in the ditch with it and spend time with it. That's a big part of the challenge for a preacher. What do I have to say that makes the parable fresh? I'd rather pass it by.

For me personally, this parable is tough, because I lived part of it out earlier this week and I did not come through it with a "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." You'll recall that we were out in West Texas at my home place, working on Callie's wedding preparations. Nick and Emily and Jane and I were in the same car and needed to have Emily back here for work on Tuesday afternoon, so we left Stamford at 6:00 in the morning. Callie and her fiancé, Ivory, had left three or four minutes before us and were going the same route as far as Abilene. About 10 minutes after 6:00 Callie called me warning me of a man wildly walking down the middle of the highway waving his arms. "Be careful," she said. "Slow down and watch for him." Sure enough we came up on him fast in the dawn's dim light. He was barely clothed, waving his arms, acting irresponsibly, out in the middle of the road. I swerved, passed by "on the other side" and kept going, just like the religious leaders in the parable.

Yes, this is a parable I'd rather pass by this week.

Luke tells us that Jesus was headed to Jerusalem when he got involved in a debate with a local attorney. The lawyer evidently did not like Jesus' message, and he was pressing Jesus, trying to make him look foolish, attempting to expose a weakness in his teaching. He was figuratively cross-examining Jesus on the witness stand: "In your view," the lawyer asked Jesus, "just what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?"

"You're the lawyer," said Jesus. "What does it say in the law?"

Well, the attorney knew the law, of course, the law of Moses, and he quoted it. "The law says, 'Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and also love your neighbor as you love yourself.'"

"Well done," said Jesus. "You are correct. Love God fully and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you will have life."

But the lawyer continuing his cross-examination, "Just what do you mean by 'neighbor'? Be precise here. Define 'neighbor.'"

It was in response to that challenge that Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' parable is about a man traveling down to Jericho who is mugged by robbers and left bleeding and near death beside the road. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous, riddled with thieves, unsafe to travel alone, and this man found out the hard way that it was dangerous.

Then Jesus tells us that a priest and then a Levite come by. Both are professional religious people, and they see the man in trouble, but do nothing, but swerve over to the far side of the road and keep going.

Next comes along a Samaritan. Now Jesus is, of course, Jewish, and the lawyer and the rest of those listening to this parable are also Jews. Even the characters in the parable are Jews – the priest, the Levite, almost surely the injured man, maybe even the robbers. But here comes a Samaritan, and Jews and Samaritans have a bitter history of racial and religious hatred. They have nothing to do with each other. Jews and Samaritans are enemies. In fact, not only would the injured man not expect any help from one of these despicable Samaritans, he also probably wouldn't want any help from a Samaritan.

But Jesus says it is this very Samaritan, “despised and rejected,” who helps the man in the ditch. Jesus says, the Samaritan “saw the man, was moved with pity, and helped him.” Notice, this simple formula: *saw – compassion – action*, is a pattern throughout the New Testament. It is also used in the other of the most famous parables, the parable of the Prodigal Son, in which the waiting father “*saw*” the younger son coming home, “had *compassion*,” and “ran” to embrace him. Jesus is clear and emphatic – when we see a need, we are moved to compassion, and then we act to meet that need.

In the parable, the Samaritan binds the man's wounds, loads him onto his donkey and takes him down the road to an Inn and pays for the man to have more medical care.

Jesus then says to the lawyer, “So, now you tell me who is the ‘neighbor.’”

The lawyer cannot bring himself even to spit out the word “Samaritan.” He simply mumbles, “The one who showed mercy.”

“Go and do likewise,” says Jesus.

My question is what does it take to go and do likewise? Why was the Samaritan moved to care for the man in the ditch while the two religious types hurried by and did not stop to help? Jesus says the Samaritan saw the man in the ditch, was moved with pity, and cared for him. Various translations translate pity as compassion, sympathy, or empathy. Compassion means to suffer with or suffer alongside. Sympathy is usually defined as feelings of pity for someone in need. Empathy means feelings of pity with someone in need. For my purposes this morning, I'm thinking of all these terms interchangeably.

Wendell Berry has a 2005 essay called "Two Minds" in which he contrasts two basic ways of thinking: the Rational Mind and the Sympathetic Mind. The Rational Mind wants to be objective, analytical, efficient, certain, and productive. The Sympathetic Mind seeks wholeness and connection, relationships. It hates estrangement, dismemberment, and disconnection. The Rational Mind's greatest fear is being wrong. The Sympathetic Mind's greatest fear is to be unloving and uncaring. Berry is clear that that all of us utilize both kinds of thinking in multiple ways, but he is also clear, that we live in a world where the Rational Mind holds sway. For Berry, our calling is to recover a more sympathetic way of thinking and living in a world where the efficient and the productive, where certitude and analysis rule (Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, "Two Minds," pp. 85-105).

Let me add, to have a sympathetic mind and heart is increasingly becoming politically and socially counter-cultural and controversial. For example, to show compassion for immigrants crossing the southern border, and house, feed, and care is more and more considered subversive. If the man in the ditch was an immigrant, would the Samaritan be arrested? Or perhaps the man in the ditch was an immigrant and the same people who beat him, decided to teach all the good Samaritans a lesson, too? Do you see what I mean?

One of the clearest sympathetic ways of thinking in the New Testament is the parable of the lost sheep (Matt. 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7), in which the shepherd has 100 sheep, but one goes missing. The shepherd leaves the 99 and goes looking for the one lost until he finds it and brings it home. The Sympathetic Mind is on the one lost sheep while a Rational Mind would be focused on safekeeping the 99 and taking the acceptable loss of 1. Berry says the Sympathetic Mind of the Good Shepherd knows or imagines what it means to be lost and therefore, goes searching for the lost.

The Samaritan in this parable has a Sympathetic Mind. He knew or imagined what it meant to be in the ditch, therefore, he cared, and had pity.

By the way, let me mention as a quick aside, that one of the ways we learn to imagine what it means to be someone else, to be our neighbor, to imagine what it means to be in a ditch, or to be someone with different challenges and perspectives and a different way of looking at the world is by reading books. Good books put us in a character's shoes, and we learn to think and feel like they do. It's good training for us to imagine from someone else's point of view, to get us out of ourselves and into another person's perspective.

Writer David James Duncan says, "The ability to love neighbor as self is beyond the reach of most people. But the attempt to imagine thy neighbor as thyself is the daily work of every literary writer and reader I know. Literature's sometimes troubling, sometimes hilarious depictions of those annoying buffoons, our neighbors, may be the greatest gift we writers give the world when they become warm-up exercises for the leap toward actually loving our neighbors" (*God Laughs and Plays*, "When Compassion Becomes Dissent," p. 64).

The Samaritan knew or imagined what it meant to be in the ditch, so he felt pity and compassion, sympathy, and empathy. It makes me wonder if the Samaritan had been beaten and robbed and left in a ditch himself. Or maybe he had a family member or friend who had been in a ditch. Or maybe he read a lot. Who knows?

Tom Long tells of Robert Wuthnow, sociologist at Princeton University, who once conducted some research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not. He found out that for many compassionate people something had happened to them. Someone had acted with compassion toward them, and this experience had transformed their lives. For example, Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a rescue squad worker, who had little reason to be a Good Samaritan. Casey was raised in a tough home, the child of an alcoholic father. He once said, "All my father ever taught me is that I didn't want to grow up to be like him."

But something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life, changed his heart. He was having surgery one day, and he was frightened. He remembers the surgical nurse standing there and compassionately reassuring him. "Don't worry," she said to Jack. "I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens." And when Jack woke up again, she was true to her word and still there.

Years later, Jack Casey, now a paramedic, was sent to the scene of a highway accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and as Jack was trying to get him out of the wreckage, gasoline was dripping down on both of them. The rescuers were using power tools to cut the metal, so one spark could have caused everything to go up in flames. The driver was frightened, crying out how scared he was of dying. Jack remembered what had happened to him long ago

on the operating table, how that nurse had spoken tenderly to him and stayed with him, and he said and did the same thing for the truck driver, “Look, don’t worry,” he said, “I’m right here with you, I’m not going anywhere.” When I said that, Jack remembered later, I was reminded of how that nurse had said the same thing and she never left me. Days later, the rescued truck driver said to Jack, “You know, you were an idiot, the thing could have exploded and we’d both have been burned up!”

“I just couldn’t leave you,” Jack said.

Something had happened to Jack Casey that transformed him, made him into a Good Samaritan (see Thomas G. Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, p. 72-73).

Has anything like that ever happened to you?

I suggest to you, that it has. Perhaps that’s what Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan is all about. Like the lawyer, we cannot stand on the sidelines and figure out how to be good, defining our terms – is this person my neighbor or not – figuring out just what we have to do to inherit eternal life. And we cannot simply grit our teeth and work harder. We are helpless to be Good Samaritans on our own strength. In other words, we are the person in the ditch, the one who lies helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs to be rescued. And along comes a Good Samaritan, a Good Samaritan named Jesus – who is despised and rejected – who sees us, comes to save us, speaks tenderly to us, lifts us into his arms, and takes us to the place of healing.

Paul tells the Colossians in the reading for today to remember that Christ “rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-

14). In other words, when we're dealing with one another in church, remember that we were once in the ditch, and that others have been or are in ditches, too.

So, the question is not the lawyer's, "What is the definition of 'neighbor'?" The question is who has been neighbor to you?

In our anger and frustration, in the grief and confusion of the times we're in, in the fear we feel on this dangerous road we're on, think about who has been a neighbor to you. Imagine, remember, and nurture a sympathetic mind and sympathetic heart.

When we remember our time in the ditches and who have been our neighbors, then we will know what it means: Go and do likewise.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.