**March 10, 2019**

**Luke 10:25-37; Psalm 82**

Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness is the usual story to begin Lent. But in reading it, people have come to believe that the whole point of Lent is to avoid temptation between now and Easter – abandoning chocolate or alcohol or sex, exercising a little more, and other such endeavors. So let me say clearly and unapologetically that is **not** the intention of the season. Lent was created by the church to prepare new believers for baptism on Easter. Those who were already church members were encouraged to relearn and refocus on ‘the basics’ of Christianity, drawing nearer to our salvation through Christ’s death and resurrection. And inasmuch, Lent is not about our sacrifice or suffering (though if that helps you in your faith journey, a little dose of sacrifice and suffering won’t hurt).

One of the scripture readings for Ash Wednesday (the first day of Lent) calls people to take notice of God and the distance between themselves and God. The prophet Joel called out: “Return to me with all your heart… read your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God [who is] abounding in steadfast love.” God does not want our ashes. God does not want our complaining. God isn’t interested in contrived suffering. God wants our hearts.

In Jesus’ ministry, every teaching, every healing, every preaching was done to bring people closer to God. Jesus wasn’t there to reward half-hearted behavior. He pushed back against the scribes and Pharisees who were more interested in outer displays of faith than the inner, honest practice of faith. Jesus wanted our whole heart, our whole mind, our whole strength. When people gave their whole selves to God, they were transformed. The transformation of their faith, in turn, would bring about transformation of every part of their lives. For loving God with their whole hearts, in investing their whole selves in Christ’s teaching, they would begin to transform their relationships (as they loved their neighbor and served their neighbor as Christ taught.) They would begin to transform the way they interacted with nature and creation (as they honored creation for what God intended). A disciple’s transformation would begin a journey towards the whole world’s well-being and transformation.

In these verses from Luke, a “lawyer” or a scholar of Jewish law – a seminary professor, perhaps – pulled Jesus into conversation. Likely expecting a pat on the back for his own wit, or maybe he just wanted a heady discussion that similarly-studied people have, filled with semantics and minute points that others wouldn’t question?? Whatever the reason, the man approached Jesus with a question he probably thought he knew the answer to. "In your view," he asked Jesus, "what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?"

But Jesus wasn’t interested in playing intellectual games. Jesus was there for theoretical conversations or to reward the man for self-righteousness. He responded, "You know. What does it say in the law?" The man knew the law and quoted from Old Testament Law. "Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and also love your neighbor as you love yourself." “Well,” said Jesus. “You're right. Love God fully and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you will have life."

But the lawyer wasn’t done. He wanted more. “Wait just a second,” he objected. “Be more specific. What do you mean by ‘neighbor’? Who exactly is my neighbor?”

Thus, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. He told about a traveler who was mugged and left seriously wounded beside the road. Whoever he was, whatever status he had, now he sought only survival. He needed help. (It was a sad story, but there was nothing unusual about it. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notoriously dangerous -- riddled with thieves, unsafe to travel alone -- so the fact that a man was beaten and robbed... well, that was a familiar story to locals. Nothing shocking here.)

But then Jesus added two genuinely shocking parts to his story. The first was that two people who could have helped -- in fact, who might have been expected to help -- a priest and a Levite (two religious people) came up the road, saw the man in trouble, and then did nothing. They avoided touching him and continued on their own journeys. But the second, and even bigger shock, was that the last person they would have expected to help was the one who, mercifully, rescued the injured man. A Samaritan. Everyone standing around Jesus (himself included) were Jewish. The characters in the parable were Jews – the priest and the Levite, and the injured man whom we assumed to be Jewish. But then came a Samaritan. And *they* knew, and you know that Jews and Samaritans had a bitter history of racial and religious hatred. These people had nothing to do with each other. Such that, not only would the injured man not expect help from one of those dirty Samaritans, he probably wouldn't want help from a Samaritan. Better to die on the road than be touched by a Samaritan. But the Samaritan, unlike the others, despised and rejected, was moved with compassion and tenderly cared for the injured man. He went out of his way to delay his journey. He gave his own supplies and money to the victim. He forever altered the course of his day and the life of that injured stranger.

Jesus then turned the question back to the lawyer. “You heard my story. Now you define the term 'neighbor.' Is it by title or action? Who proved to be the neighbor?” To which the lawyer replied, “The one who showed mercy.”

A simple answer to the parable is to say that Jesus wants us to go out and be just like that Good Samaritan. He cared for someone in need; we should imitate him. But there are two problems with this: 1) The first being that *if this* were Jesus' point, he probably would have told the story differently. He would have made it into a simple moral example and left out all that troubling Samaritan business. He could have just said “there was a man in trouble and three people passed by who could have helped. The first one didn't, and neither did the second, but the third one did, so be like the third one and not like the first two.” That wouldn’t be a bad sermon; but this wasn't a simple moral story. It was a parable. And parables always have something shocking, surprising, unexpected, something to be wrestled with and puzzled over.

2) The second problem is more significant. If Jesus’ point was that he wanted us to imitate the courageous compassion of the Samaritan, the sad fact is we can't. It is not in our nature to forget ourselves and risk everything for a stranger. Random acts of kindness, occasional acts of heroism are not the *modus operandi* for the human race, or even Christians; they are the exceptions. More often, we are paralyzed by our own needs, or even oblivious to others’ needs; we fail to see and acknowledge and respond to victims we pass every day. Knowing in our minds “the right thing to do” does not mean that we do it. If we are going to be **good** Samaritans, then we need more than a change of mind. We need a change of heart.

What the lawyer discovered – and what we discover, too – is that we cannot stand on the sidelines and *think about* how to be good. We cannot get stuck in polity, semantics, or definitions – is *this* person my neighbor?, is *that* person my neighbor? We cannot focus solely on the theoretical reward of faith – figuring out exactly what we need to do to inherit eternal life. We must get our hands dirty. We must give our whole heart and mind and hands and strength to God. Not just one hour a week, or one happy thought a day, or one convenient moment a month. If we give God our whole selves and follow Christ’s teaching to love God and neighbor, we will get dirty. We will be hurt. And we will be transformed.

The truth is that we are the person in the ditch, the one who lies helpless and wounded beside the road, the one who needs saving, but cannot save ourselves. The Good News is that a Good Samaritan is coming down the road, a Good Samaritan named Jesus – despised and rejected – is coming to save us. He speaks tenderly to us, lifts us into his arms, and takes us to the place of healing.

While the lawyer asked “What is the definition of ‘neighbor’?” likely hoping to point back at himself and what he has done to earn his reward, Jesus steered him to a different question: “who has been neighbor to you?” (pause)

Jesus Christ has been neighbor to you. The crucified one has been neighbor to you. “The Lord hears the cry of the poor.” That’s us. We are the poor in spirit. We are the poor in mind. We are the poor in salvation. We need God’s mercy and Christ’s salvation. The Good News of the Gospel is that we have received God’s mercy and Christ’s salvation. Jesus saw us wounded in the road, and changed his life that we might have life. Now, because we have received his mercy, because we have received life, we can respond in kind. Now we can “go, and do likewise.”

Forget about all of those “spiritual disciplines” that only point back to yourself. Let this be your Lenten discipline – to pursue God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Invest in your relationship with God. Read the Bible a little more. Spend an extra few minutes praying. Take on an extra act of service. In doing so, you will participate in God’s transformation of creation. As you love God with your whole heart, you will begin to receive a change of heart. As you love your neighbor a little more, you will share the Good News that salvation is at hand. Death is not the end of our story. New life is just around the corner. Come and see what God is doing! Come and share in the work God has for us. Amen.