

Luke 10:25-37

Luke 10:25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27 He answered, “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.” 28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

Luke 10:29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I

come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

GOOD SAMARITAN?

Someone in our Bible study asked me, “So, what’s the sermon going to be about this Sunday?” That’s the sixty-four dollar question each week, at least for me it is. Some weeks are harder than others.

This week, of course the path the sermon should take seems quite obvious and predictable. Our lesson for today is the story of the Good Samaritan. It is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. This story has become such a part of popular culture that almost everyone knows the story and thinks that they know what the story means.

In our own community we have Good Samaritan Village, that place where everyone is someone in God’s love. There are “Good Samaritan Laws” in many states, laws that are designed to protect those who give aid to a person in an emergency situation. These laws encourage people to go and do likewise,

to help others who are sick or injured without having to worry about a lawsuit down the road.

But, like so many stories in the Bible, we don't understand this parable nearly as well as we think we do. For example, the name itself is not supported by the biblical text. Nowhere in our passage for today is the Samaritan called good.

You see the word "good" and the word "Samaritan" did not go together in Jesus' day. Do you remember a few weeks ago when I preached on the turning point in the gospel of Luke? Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem, and he sent his disciples to make advance preparations for that journey.

They were going to take the direct route through Samaria. And the Samaritans refused to help the disciples in any way because they knew that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.

The Samaritans thought that the Jews had it all wrong. They didn't have to go to Jerusalem to worship God. They could worship God just fine in their own country.

The animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans was a feud animated by religious fervor. We can see

the intensity of that feud when James and John, the Sons of Thunder, after being rejected by the Samaritans, ask Jesus, “So, is now the time that we call down fire from above and destroy these half-breed, half-baked heretics?”

THE ENEMY SAVIOR

But, much to their surprise Jesus did not sanction such judgment. On the contrary, Jesus rebuked James and John and moved on down the road to the next village.

Clearly Jesus did not see Samaritans in the same way other Jews saw them. And this is the whole point of today’s parable. In God’s kingdom even enemies can be saved. In God’s kingdom even enemies can be saviors.

Shockingly, in the world of the parable even the radical Muslim who wants to destroy us can be portrayed as the one who does the right thing. Instead of planting improvised bombs by the side of the road, this member of Al-Qaeda decides to save someone by the side of the road.

Can you imagine such a thing? It is hard to imagine. It seems so unrealistic. Those who first heard this

parable would have reacted in the same way. They would have asked,

“How can this be? Samaritans don’t act this way.”

There is a hint of this surprise in the Scripture lesson for today. Jesus asked the lawyer, “Who did the neighborly thing?” And the lawyer didn’t say, “the Samaritan.”

Instead, he said, “The one who showed him mercy.”

The lawyer couldn’t even bring himself to say the word, Samaritan. Even a hypothetically good Samaritan was a bridge too far for the lawyer.

A PARABLE

Once again I need to remind you that the story of the Samaritan and the man in distress by the side of the road is a parable. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

In other words, a parable doesn’t describe the world the way it is. Nor does the parable tell us what we can do.

The parable tells us what God can do. The Bible gives us a vision of the kingdom that comes when God's will is done.

When we think salvation is impossible, God does the impossible. In a world where people remain bystanders as a woman is brutally murdered, Jesus imagines a world in which someone is willing to stop and help.

In a world where Samaritans and Jews are at each other's throats, Jesus has the audacity to imagine a Samaritan who is good and binds up the wounds of a Jew. (Replace the word Samaritan with Palestinian and you have a parable that is relevant even today.)

When we say "thy kingdom come, thy will be done" we have no illusions. We do not have the ability to bring in the kingdom, even in a small way. No matter how hard we try it won't work.

But, in the Bible and especially in the life and ministry of Jesus we see a picture of how God's will is done ... often in spite of what we do.

We still live in a world that crucifies the compassionate. We still live in a world where cynicism and mistrust run deep.

We shouldn't be overly critical of the Priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side. There was a practical side to what they did. Getting involved is dangerous. Compassion still carries a risk.

But, sometimes, by the grace of God, the unexpected happens. A Samaritan stops to help, and the world is turned upside down.

THE BLIND SIDE

Many of you have seen the movie, "The Blind Side." It's about a young African American who grows up on the mean streets of the city. He is homeless. But, amazingly he is adopted by a rich white family and is given the opportunity to go to a good school.

He studies hard, and works hard to become a great football player. He graduates from a major university and is drafted as an offensive lineman for the NFL.

Suppose for a moment that you didn't know this was based on a true story. How would you react to a movie with this story line? You would say something like,

"This is so corny. This is so unrealistic.

Can't those writers in Hollywood do better than this? It's hard to imagine something like this ever happening."

And yet it did.

I think that's why Michael Oher's story has gotten so much attention. It presents a view of the world that is hard to believe. This unlikely story challenges us to re-imagine what is possible in our world.

Sean Tuohy, the father in this story said,

"A miracle hit us in the face, and we didn't run from it. That's all we did."

The Tuohys did save Michael's life, but they also believe that Michael has enriched their lives immensely. Michael got a good home and a good education, but they feel like in welcoming Michael into their home they were blessed as well.

They describe it as like having won the lottery. They want others to think about the fact that the person you are passing on the street might be the very person who can change your life forever.

INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?

I think that's what Jesus was saying to the lawyer. Remember the lawyer wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. (Actually, he didn't want to know. He thought he already knew and was trying to test Jesus.)

But, through this story the lawyer learned that knowing the Word wasn't enough. Somehow we need to find a way to cooperate with the miracle of mercy that God is sending our way this day.

I wonder if the lawyer changed after hearing this story.

Our story for today began with an assumption about faith. The lawyer asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Note that the lawyer assumes eternal life is his birthright. He just wonders which technique will get him what he wants in the most efficient way.

One commentator wrote,

"After all, Jesus is a 'teacher' of religion, and what is religion 'for' if it's not a technique to get whatever it

is we desire? We have tried psychology, 12 steps to recovery, Prozac. What does religion offer earnest seekers-after-eternity like us?”

But, through the parable the lawyer learns (and we learn as well) that true religion is not about getting what we want. True religion is about doing what faith requires.

Sean Tuohy put it well. When a miracle hits us in the face we have to learn not to run from it.

LEARNING COMPASSION

True religion is learning to see ourselves in that broken person by the side of the road. In fact that is the definition of compassion, and it was compassion that motivated the actions of the Samaritan. The Samaritan was able to say, “That could be me.”

Can you do that? Can you see yourself as a broken person by the side of the road? How does the story change if we identify with the broken man beside the road?

If we were battered and bruised and stripped of all that we love, then I dare say we wouldn't worry about the fact that salvation is coming in the person

that we thought was our enemy. In fact, at a moment like this when we are so vulnerable, we are willing to reevaluate everything.

When you receive life giving mercy the walls that divide us don't seem so important any more. The walls come tumbling down and grace triumphs over animosity.

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

In a sermon on this passage Anthony Robinson told of a time when strangers became very important to him. He was with a church group on a short-term mission trip to Nicaragua.

The folks in this part of the world were very poor, and he had the idea that they were coming to help them. After all, they were the rich, powerful people who had the resources to go and get things done.

The mission group was comprised mainly of young people. In fact Anthony's two sons ... one 17 and one 21 ... were a part of the team. As their time in Nicaragua wore on it became increasingly apparent that one of his sons was becoming very ill. He was slipping further and further from reality ... becoming psychotic.

Anthony said that it was all he could do not to start weeping uncontrollably. He was terrified and had no idea where to turn for help. He felt very much like the broken man by the side of the road in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

And then he received help, not from first world doctors or American diplomats but from a series of strangers. A tough young Nicaraguan man dressed in a t-shirt and sporting several gold chains served as his driver and eventually got him back to the States.

There was a weird homeopathic physician who looked like a cross between Rasputin and Svengali. His office lacked the pristine trappings of the usual doctor's office, but he gave his time and services and did not ask for compensation. (His father, as it turns out, was a pastor. He understood that pastors don't have much money.)

He said that on the journey home he might not have made it if it were not for the assistance of an airline worker, a woman with big hair, high heels, and a Texas accent, ... characteristics that challenged all his stereotypes.

He concluded,

“All sorts of people that I never would have thought to turn to did help me. As I struggled to get my son home safely ... I found myself receiving help and care from people I expected to give help to, not receive it from. I found myself relying upon people I would never have expected to know, much less trust.”

Anthony learned a valuable lesson about Bible study in this experience. How we interpret a story depends upon whom we identify with in the story. Suppose we are the victims. Suppose life has come apart for us and we receive help from a total stranger, even someone that we previously despised. How would that change our life?

CHANGED BY COMPASSION

I wonder how the broken man in our lesson for today might have changed after he learned of the Samaritan's mercy. Did he tell the story to his Jewish friends? Did he strike up a friendship with this Samaritan? Did he become more compassionate and merciful toward others?

I invite you to think about the times in your life that you felt broken and abandoned. Think about the people who stopped to help. And use that experience

as a way to understand what God is calling you to do today.

Some of the most compassionate people I know are people who have spent a lot of time by the side of the road in pain and despair.

But, they did not let that time of brokenness destroy their hope. Instead, they have used their deep pain as a way to understand the needs of others.

Like it or not we are all on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is a road filled with unseen dangers. Somewhere along the way all of us will be robbed of the things we love the most. Somewhere along the way all of us will be helpless and alone.

Can we imagine that day? For some of us it's not too hard to do. Some of us feel that way right now.

Just remember that we don't have to travel the road alone. There are others who go the same way. And some are still some good Samaritans. There are still people who know the pain that we feel and are willing to take the risk of stopping to help.

You see the story of the Good Samaritan never ends.

It is a continuing saga of broken people learning the lesson of compassion and hope by the side of the road. It is the continuing saga of how a body broken and blood shed can become the occasion for a greater salvation.

That sounds vaguely familiar. I think ... there may be another story in the Bible that teaches that same lesson.

Amen.