

## Extravagant Mercy

(Luke 10:25-37)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 14, 2019

In the name of the one God: creator; redeemer; and sustainer. Amen.

Until yesterday, I thought I knew where I was going to go in my brief exploration of the Gospel reading we just heard.

At the beginning of the week, there were a few things that I thought I was sure of. I don't for instance have any doubt in my mind that this is one of those parables you've heard enough times that you'd likely come reasonably close to reciting it from memory. Without question it's certainly one of the most recognizable of the teachings of Jesus. You're likely aware that it actually lends its name to the so-called "Good Samaritan laws" that were put in place to provide legal protections for those offering assistance to someone who has been injured.

As you're also likely aware, it's a challenging parable, one that forces us to consider who among the travelers acted as the true neighbor to the one who had been beaten and left on the side of the road. And in my experience consideration of those challenges has come up in some very interesting places. I can recall a time 22 years ago when one of my favorite undergraduate professors, in a political philosophy class he taught, led us through a spirited discussion ... actually, a debate ... of the social and moral ramifications of the actions taken here. A parable ... being discussed in a politics class!

Yes, at the beginning of the week I thought I knew where I was going with all of this. But by mid-afternoon yesterday, I wasn't so sure. Let me give you a bit of background on why. Taking advantage of one of those rare opportunities to spend some time out while the kids are away with the grandparents, Amy I decided to head to Maryland to explore some history.

We spent a bulk of the day at two places. First, we visited the Kennedy Farm, near Sharpsburg, the site from which John Brown launched his 1859 raid against the arsenal at Harper's Ferry. Nearly a century later, it was bought by the Black Elks who built a music hall that featured performances by musical legends ... James Brown, and Aretha Franklin, and Marvin Gaye, and many, many others.

Our second stop was the battlefield at Antietam ... a place of unspeakable tragedy. It wasn't my first visit, but despite having been there before the heaviness of its history and my acute sorrow were no less intense. So many lives lost in a single day. A tragic and vivid display of a country in pain ... a country being torn apart. And I noticed at one point that as I took pictures, I wasn't focusing on monuments, or narrative markers; I was taking pictures of the landscape ... focusing

on the earth on which this tragedy took place, the earth that all these years later bears the scars of this conflict.

As we were walking and driving from place to place, I was still trying to reflect on what this sermon should say about the Good Samaritan and about acting as neighbors. Instead, I found myself pulled to reflect on the meaning of some of what Amy and I were seeing in our journey. Slavery. Segregation. War. And then from there I spent some time dwelling on many of the tragic circumstances in today's world ... circumstances that are the result of the faults of many and a reflection of people from all sides. Racism. Violence. Discrimination. Harsh rhetoric ... and harsher responses. Hatred that is often displayed overtly rather than concealed a bit more covertly. Old differences coming to the surface and wedges driving their way into new ones. An earth that continues to be the platform on which so many bad things happen ... an earth that continues unceasingly to bear the scars of our conflicts.

At the end of all of this, I had a question? What are we supposed to do? What am I supposed to do? And I turned back to the Gospel reading ... and the answer was right there. *Just as the Samaritan had done, go and do likewise.*

*Go and show mercy.*

And in that moment, I knew once again where I was supposed to go with my thoughts this morning.

In the face of all that is wrong in the world today, the way that we can be neighbors ... the way that we can nudge things back in the right direction ... the way that we can start to address the ills in the world ... is to show mercy. It is the obvious point that Jesus was making in the telling of this parable. And it is the obvious point we can make in all that we do.

We can be like the volunteers in our food pantry who month in and month out show love and mercy to the hungry in our community. We can be like a little six-year-old girl named Paisley I learned about on last night's evening news, who after learning of the various humanitarian crises around the world started raising money to send toys to children overseas ... and now has a foundation bearing her name that is working to build a school for children seeking a bit of mercy in the midst of the horrible conflict in Syria.

We can display mercy in the way we deal with those with whom we differ, replacing an anger and bitterness that blinds us with the clear vision that we are at the end of the day brothers and sisters in one human family. We can display mercy in the way we support one another through the good times and the bad. We can display mercy in the easy tasks of caring for those we love ... and we should do the same in the more difficult work of caring for those to whom extending love seems difficult.

It's important to remember one thing: being a neighbor is about relationship ... about who we are to one another. Even more significantly, it's about how we are to one another, and that was

ultimately the point of the parable shared by Jesus in today's Gospel reading. The neighbor ... in this case, a Samaritan, part of a group that often found itself cast to the margins in the Israel of Jesus' day ... was the one who saw someone in need and stopped to care for him. It didn't matter that they were from different segments of society. In his response, we see that the Samaritan didn't see himself as a Samaritan, but as a human being ... and in this moment on this lonely wilderness road, he didn't see the man lying wounded as a Jewish traveler in need of help, but as a fellow human in trouble.

What's truly remarkable is that the Samaritan didn't just offer immediate help; he provided ***ongoing care***. He demonstrated a love that wasn't offered just out of a sense of obligation; it was a love that was ***extravagant***. He binds his wounds and pours oil and wine on them. He gives up his seat so that the injured man will not have to walk. He takes him to an inn and pays in advance for his care. He even announces he will pass back through and pay for any care above and beyond the money he has already provided.

Jesus often tells stories and shares lessons of what it means to give extravagantly from our love. Does someone sue for your shirt? Give them your cloak, too. Love your enemies. Learn from the vineyard owner who paid the last hired as much as the first. Watch the joyful giving of the father who throws an elaborate banquet and gives all he has to a son who had abandoned his home, his family and his heritage. In each of these instances, just as we see in today's Gospel, people act as they do towards others ... towards their neighbors ... not because they ***have*** to, but because they ***want*** to.

They do so because they are ***merciful***. In the midst of the moments of our lives when it will be ... and I say will be because life always presents them ... easier to cross to the other side of the road, figuratively or literally, may we remember the actions of the Samaritan. May we remember the grace they showed. May we remember the extravagance of what they shared.

And when the time comes for us to respond and to act, may we do likewise and may we be loving ... and extravagant ... and merciful.

Amen.