

Year C

5 Pentecost, Proper 10

Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan is another thing that we have, sort of, domesticated in our society. We even named the Good Samaritan Law after it, making it illegal to prosecute anyone who accidentally harms someone while attempting to do a good deed. Being a Good Samaritan generally means being kind to strangers, and sometimes going out of our way to be helpful. These are good things for us to be doing, of course, but Jesus is saying so much more than that in his story, as I think you'll see when we look more closely.

Jesus is questioned by a lawyer who asks him what is necessary to do in order to inherit eternal life. Instead of answering, Jesus turns the question back on the man, who as a scholar of Jewish law, knows the answer immediately: "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." Jesus says, "You have given the right answer; do this and you will live."

But the lawyer isn't happy with this situation—in a way he wants to limit the group of people that he's required to love. He wants the letter of the law, but not the spirit, so he asks Jesus, "and who is my neighbor?" which leads to this parable. We know this story well, but I want to point out a few things, and I want you to imagine yourself as this first century Jewish person lying on the side of the road. You've been beaten, stripped, and all of your valuables have been stolen, and you're lying there looking like you might be dead. The first person to come along the road is a temple priest, almost the highest ranking person there is, who sees you, but he knows that touching a dead body will make him ritually unclean, and unable to perform his temple duties without a lot of tedious ritual and expensive sacrifice. He looks the other way, crosses the road, and continues on. You are lying there in the dirt, half dead, in pain.

Next a Levite comes along, who might have been thinking about his ritual purity, and his temple duties as well—and what if this is a trap? Because he also hurries on, leaving you lying in the blistering heat and the dust. Then a Samaritan comes along. And my friends, you don't see the Samaritan, and think "at last, someone who will help me!" NO, you think, "oh God, a Samaritan, please don't let him finish me off," because the Jews and the Samaritans were enemies. For Jesus to choose a Samaritan as this man's savior is like me telling a story, and choosing a terrorist as the good guy—or a Nazi. Samaritans were the stereotypical bad guys, and also disgusting, because they worshiped the same God as the Jews, but in ways that were unclean and unacceptable to them. To the people of Jesus's time, saying Good Samaritan would have been like saying "Good Terrorist," or "Good Nazi," kind of like an oxymoron. So the hearers of Jesus's tale would have been unlikely to anticipate help from this Samaritan traveler, much less the remarkable help he gives. In addition, you, the victim would not expect anything good from him. That's what's so astounding about the story. Jesus is being radical again.

At the end of the story Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Notice that the lawyer is so offended by Jesus's story, that he can't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." He says "the one who showed him mercy." And Jesus says, "God and do likewise." In other words everyone is your neighbor. There are no limits on God's love, and God's mercy.

I once saw a patient who had been in a car accident. While driving on a back road, he had suffered a stroke, and run off the road into a tree. My visit was a couple of days after the accident, and he was telling me of his fear and sense of helplessness as he sat in his car, dazed and unable to help himself. "I thought I might die there, and I was prayin' and prayin' for help, you know," she said. "Then these two fellahs pulled up in their truck" and he paused his story, staring off into space. "Well, they argued

what to do about me—should they call 911, or try to take me themselves,” he continued. “They decided to take me themselves, and hauled me into the back of their truck. They...they drove me to the emergency room and left me there with the nurses.” The man then began to cry, deep, racking sobs.

Sitting and waiting for him to finish his tears, I noticed that this man had a cross tattooed inside his right forearm with “Jesus Saves” underneath it. On the inside of his left forearm was a heart with a woman’s name on it. Eventually the man calmed, and looked at me seriously. “Preacher, why did God do this to me?” he asked.

“You mean, you believe God gave you this stroke?”

“No, I mean, Preacher, those men who found me was” and he indicated that they had been black men, by using a word that I won’t repeat. “For two days now I’ve been thinkin’ I’d ruther be dead than helped by them. I hadn’t told none of my family that they WASN’T white. It’s shameful.”

“It’s shameful?” I asked.

“Well, now I’m wonderin’...I’m wonderin’ WHAT’S really shameful. Those men, they knew I don’t like their kind. Even though I couldn’t say much when they got to me, I...I got stickers on my truck that speak my mind. But they still helped me. Who would DO that?”

“Jesus would do it,” I said quietly.

“I know it—I know it!” he said, and he began to cry again, softly.

As we sit here together, I wonder, who is it that YOU would rather die than have help from? Is there any person, or group of persons, who have your contempt, disgust, or hatred? Think a minute. THIS is your neighbor. THIS is the person that Jesus says we are to love.

Amen.